IX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!
FEBRUARY
15¢

STAR WESTERN

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

THE BIG 144 PAGE MAGAZINE

LEN SERINGO'S GOLD-CAMP ARMY *by* W. RYERSON JOHNSON

FIRST AID FROM THE OWLHOOT *by* STONE CODY

BULLWHIPS FOR PURGATORY *by* TOM ROAN

HARRY F. OLMSTED

EASY WAY...

Tints Hair

JET BLACK!

(ALSO 7 SHADES OF BLACK, BROWN, TITIAN AND BLONDE)

New Creme Shampoo instantly imparts lovely black color to hair that is

STREAKED • DULL • GRAY
FADED • GRAYING • AGEING
BURNT • LIFELESS

THIS remarkable new creme shampoo discovery, Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring, lathers and washes out dirt, grease and grime as it *instantly* gives hair a real smooth, Jet Black Tint that fairly glows with life and lustre. Don't put up with gray, faded, dull, burnt, streaked, off-color hair a minute longer. Tintz Creme Shampoo contains genuine Paraphenylene Diamine and is a real Instant Hair Coloring. The first application leaves your hair completely tinted; black, lovely, easy to manage. No waiting for results. Colors so smooth and even, experts find it difficult to detect. Won't hurt permanents. Now being specially introduced all over America by mail for only $1.00.

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Tintz' chemists have at last perfected an amazing new hair coloring method. It is a creme shampoo containing genuine PARAPHENYLENE DIAMINE, the best hair coloring agent known to mankind! Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring *instantly* colors all gray, streaked, faded hair right in your own home to a natural-like, lasting color that matches and defies detection. Won't wash off or run off. Positively will not affect permanent waves. Leaves hair soft—easy to manage.

CHOICE OF 8 LOVELY SHADES

JET BLACK—BLACK—DARK BROWN
MED. WARM BROWN—MED. DRAB BROWN
LIGHT BROWN—AUBURN (TITIAN)—BLONDE

We want you to try Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring. We want you to take advantage of this special introductory offer and mail the coupon today. Send no money. On arrival of package, deposit only $1 plus postage and tax with postman. READ THE CAUTION—Use Only as Directed on Label—then shampoo-tint your own hair right in your own home. We are sure just one trial will convince anyone who wishes to dye their own hair that here at last is the hair coloring of their dreams! But if for any reason you wish to return the empty Tintz package, and you alone are the judge, do so in 7 days. We will immediately refund your $1 and tax without question. This is today's big offer to anyone who wishes to INSTANTLY color hair! Don't delay but mail the coupon now—sure!

SHAMPOOING SPREADS COLOR EVENLY. It is impossible to do a blotchy job with Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring. If you can follow easy directions—results are guaranteed. Tintz contains PARAPHENYLENE DIAMINE—the best hair coloring agent known.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY SURE

TINTZ CO., Dept. 978, 205 N. Michigan, Chicago, Ill.
Canadian Office: Dept. 978, 22 College Street, Toronto, Ont.

Send one full size tube Tintz Creme Shampoo Hair Coloring in shade checked below. On arrival I will deposit the special introductory offer price of $1.00 plus 10% tax and postage charges with postman on guarantee I can return the empty tube for any reason within 7 days and you will refund my $1 and tax. (If money comes with order, Tintz pays the postage.) ☐ 3 for $2.50 plus 10% Federal Excise Tax.

☐ Jet Black ☐ Dark Brown ☐ Med. Drab Brown ☐ Auburn (Titian)
☐ Black ☐ Med. Warm Brown ☐ Light Brown ☐ Blonde

Name .....
Print Plainly
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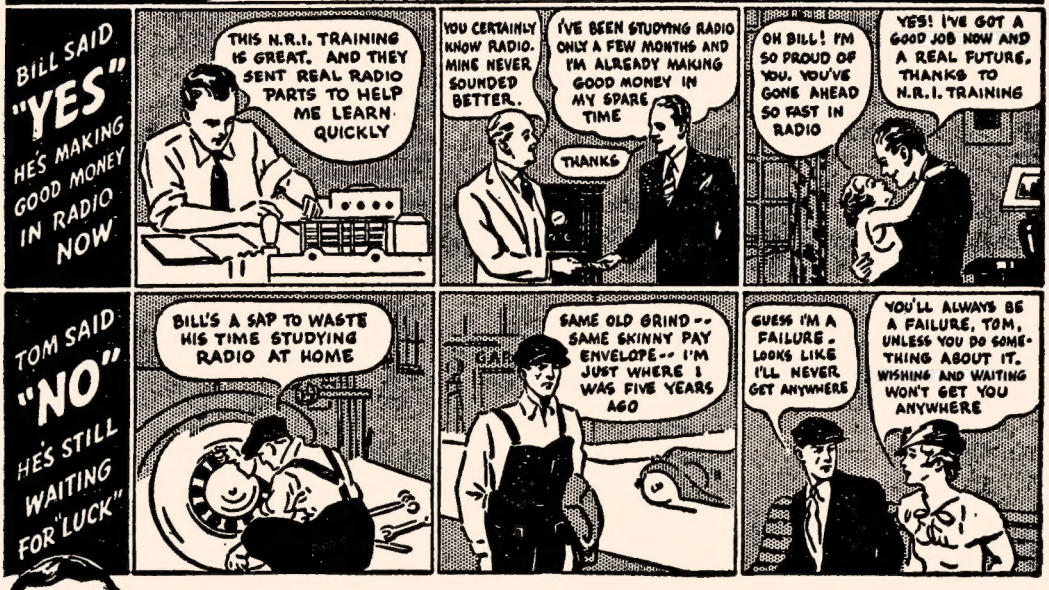
City ..... *State* .....

YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW.
NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.


BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND-- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE-- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make $5, $10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make $30, $40, $50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

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Beginners Quickly Learn to Earn $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

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Dept. 2BS9, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

MARCH ISSUE — PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 4th!

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 144-PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TWENTY-SIX — FEBRUARY, 1942 — NUMBER ONE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

LEN SIRINGO'S GOLD-CAMP ARMY.....*W. RYERSON JOHNSON* 10
A blood-hungry, gold-greedy human spider, Curt Wolfang wove his deadly web about the rich diggin's of Cactus Bonanza. . . . While, blind to their own peril, the peace-loving miners put off sending for Len Siringo—until too late!

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What chance had Rance Mutray, ex-outlaw, of living, when Trig Masters and his killer-crew called to collect the bloodstained stolen gold which Rance had already returned to its rightful owner?

HOSS GREER—KILLER-FOR-HIRE!.....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 52
When honest, loveable Old Hoss Greer masqueraded as a bounty-money bushwhacker, he found he'd signed on with a vicious raider outfit, who'd marked his own spread for red destruction—and Hoss Greer, himself, for boothill hell!

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★ ★ Star Western Features ★ ★

THE AUGURIN' PEN.....*CONDUCTED BY OLD WRANGLER* 6
Join the friendly crowd on the top rail of the old pole corral—where everyone has a chance to have his say about the Old West.

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 130
They were rough and tough—and sometimes nasty!

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS!

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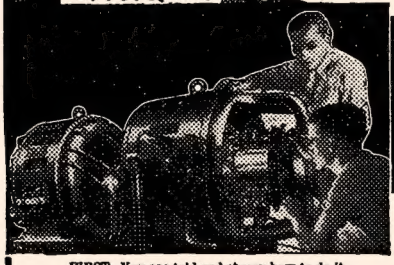
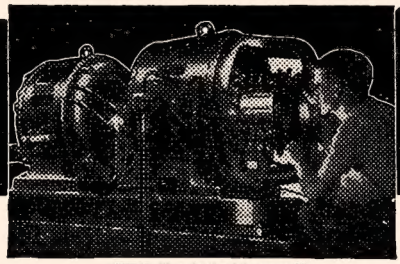
TO TRAIN FOR ELECTRICITY

IN 12 WEEKS

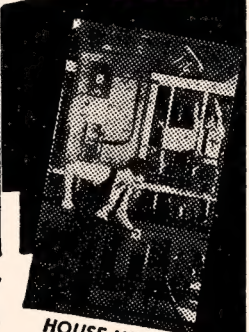
by Actual SHOP WORK NOT BOOKS



FIRST--You are told and shown how to do it.



THEN--You do the job yourself.



HOUSE WIRING only one of the many branches you "Learn By Doing."

DOES YOUR PRESENT JOB QUALIFY UNDER THESE 4 IMPORTANT RULES?

Don't be fooled by a "mere job." Does your present job offer you a **permanent job and a future in good times or bad times?** If it doesn't . . . If it is just a "job" because conditions are good today . . . **it may not be a job when conditions slacken up again.**

You should take an inventory of your prospects now—

Ask yourself these 4 important questions—**No. 1.–Does the field I'm in today offer me a permanent job and a future regardless of good or bad times?—No. 2.—Is the field I'm in a permanent one?—No. 3.–Is it growing and will it continue to grow in the years ahead?—No. 4.–Is it a field that will always exist?**

If it doesn't qualify under these 4 rules, **now is the time to do something about it.**

Electricity is a fast growing field. It qualifies under all these rules. It offers you your opportunity — if you will get ready for it.

Here at my school in Chicago, the **world's Electrical Center,** you can get **12 weeks' Shop Training in ELECTRICITY** and **an extra 4 weeks' Course in Radio.** Here at Coyne you **"Learn by Doing."**

You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you **don't need previous experience or a lot of education.** You do actual work on electrical machinery.

Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in **Diesel, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning** at no extra cost. Our practical shop methods make it **easier to learn—First** the instructors **tell** you **how** a thing should be done—**then** they **show** you how it should be done—**then you do the actual work yourself.**

AN EXTRA 4 WEEKS COURSE IN RADIO INCLUDED

"I sure was satisfied with Coyne... I got work right after I graduated and I feel that Coyne has brought me success in increasing my earnings." J. Halyk, Canada

"... Coyne has first class instructors to teach you the simplest things to start with and they have the equipment to show you these things as you advance..." Ben Rickman, S. Car.

I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

You can get this training **first**—then you **can pay for it later in easy monthly payments,** starting **60 days** after your 12 weeks' training period is over—**then you have 12 months** to complete your payments. If you need **part time work** to help out with expenses while training in my shops, my employment department will help you get it. Then after graduation this department will give you valuable **lifetime employment service.**

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my **"Pay After Graduation" plan,** how many **earn while learning** and how we help our students **after graduation.** Fill in, clip coupon, **mail today** for my **big free book** and all the facts.

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Dear Sir: Please send me free your big catalog and full particulars of your present offer, also your "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan, and also tell me about the **Extra 4 Weeks' Radio Course.**

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Address.....

City..... State.....

THE AUGURIN' PEN

Conducted by

Old Wrangler

The friendly meeting place on the top rail of the pole corral, where an old wild-horse tamer tells you about some of his experiences "way back when." . . . And where everyone on the spread has his or her chance to join in the talk. . . .

I NEVER can recollect anything I can't remember, and vice-versa. I rode with a ranny, one time, on the Pecos that we called "Phunny Phil". His rear moniker was Lewis. He sure could ride and rope—and eat apple pie made of dried apples.

The foregoing was the result of a letter I received from a reader down in Santa Fe in which it was explained that he had spent a couple of weeks on a dude ranch not far from Mesa, Arizona, owned by a ranny named Phil Lewis. The letter spilled quite smart about Phil, the boss of the spread, and then it went on to tell about a mouse-colored gelding on the ranch which the writer had come to like so well he wanted to buy it, and take it home with him, but Phil just grinned and said anybody might just as well try to buy his right eye. . . . Folks do get that way about hosses. I recollect a red roan I owned once. . . .

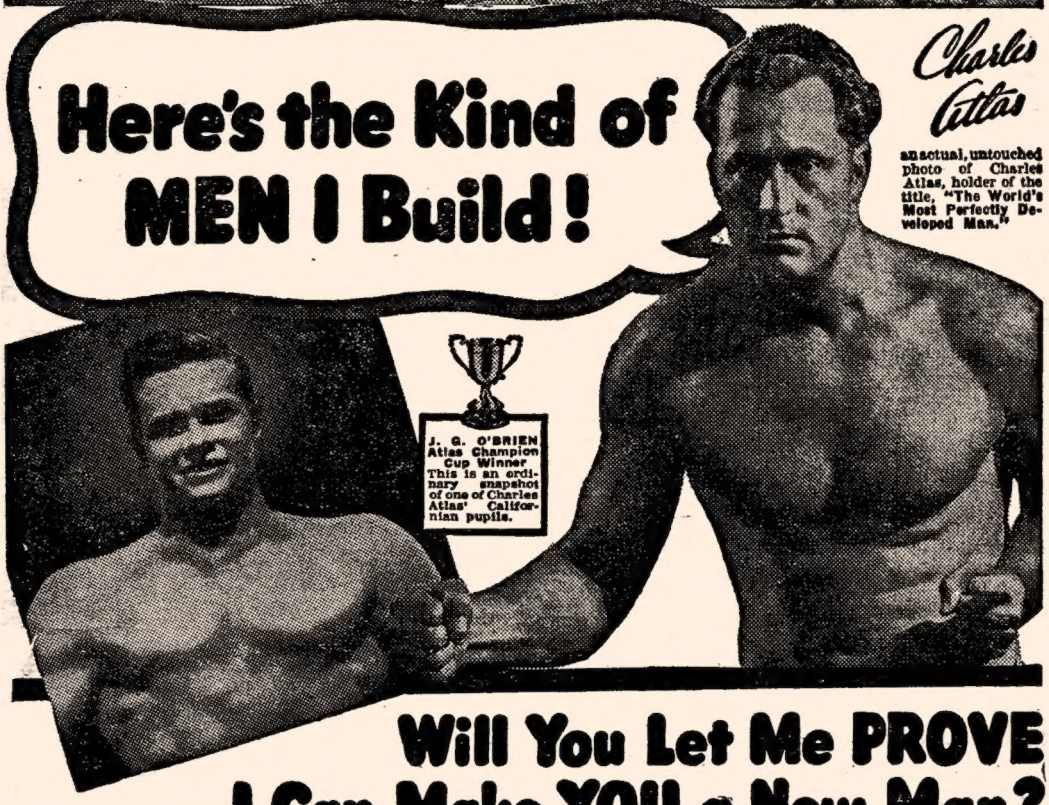
Thor—that's what I called the hoss—was an Oregon bronco. I caught him myself in the Salmon River country by perpetrating one of the dirtiest tricks any hombre ever could be guilty of!

One day I saw a herd of the finest looking broncs I had ever heard of. I followed them for about four days, studying them. The leader was a red roan stallion. I found that his Number One sweetie was

(Continued on page 8)

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME ?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!


Charles Atlas
an actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."
J. G. O'BRIEN Atlas Champion Cup Winner This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! 'Dynamic Tension' WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"

I was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won against all comers. My secret is "Dynamic Tension." It is a natural method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish for lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

ONLY 15 MINUTES A DAY

Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that "Dynamic Tension" is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about "Dynamic Tension" and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

Send for FREE BOOK

Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my "Dynamic Tension" method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83P, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Continued from page 6)

a dapple gray mare with a long tail, which single-footed all over the place, the same as the red roan did, when he wasn't running like the wind.

At that time I was riding a gelding which was about seventeen hands high—and as strong as any animal I ever forked. But it couldn't get within a mile of that red roan. So I found out where they liked best to water—a ford, with a sandy beach and a lot of willows and alders, and some hazel bushes.

I tethered the gelding back in the brush and lay on the ground watching for the red roan and his sweetie to come down, with the others, to drink. I waited for about three hours a day, for nearly a week. Finally the red roan came down a winding trail from the top of the bluff above the river, followed by his dapple gray sweetie—and then about thirty or forty other members of his harem.

Finally I got my chance. I let fly with my leather lariat and caught the mare by the off hind leg. Quicker than you can say scat I took a hitch around a tree, and there she was. The others scampered up that hill like a bunch of jack-rabbits.

But Sweetie and I became acquainted. I petted her. Got a coupla lumps of brown sugar into her mouth. Put a blind-fold over her eyes. She kicked right smart for a spell, but finally she realized I wouldn't hurt her, and that I liked her.... I saddled her, and rode her on the little beach. She might have dumped me into the water, but she didn't.

It was plumb dark before we got through getting acquainted. Then I tied her up back in the brush, around the bend of the river, and rode back to the ranch house where we lived; wild hoss trappers—twenty-two of us.

The next morning I went down and fed the mare some oats, and some more sugar, and petted her again. Of course, she had a front and a hind leg tied, and she was blind-folded. Then I rode her again. . . . She bucked some, and reared up, and shook herself, and all that, but she didn't buck as hard as she could.

This kept up for about a week. I watered her twice a day, at the ford, and rode her twice every day, and gave her sugar.

Finally, I rode her up the trail to the top of the bluff. There she whirled a little, and did some fancy pitching. But I petted her neck and talked sweet to her. . . .

Well, one night I am lying on the ground back in the brush, all set with lariats and hoods and a saddle and everything and the moon is full and the ravine is filled with an opalescent light like that of a million candles set in lanterns. . . . The red roan comes down the trail; the mare is tied to a rope about fifteen feet long, one end tied to the butt of a six-inch oak tree, back from the water's edge.

He stops and whinnies. And she talks back. And then he comes on down and sashays up to her, and puts his neck over hers.

What do *I* do. I creep close and closer, keeping out of sight behind brush and rocks. Finally I let go with the leather lariat. Around the red roan's neck. Then I take a hitch around a tree, and grab up another lariat. I let fly with this and grab King Red around one of his hind legs. Pretty soon down he goes, kicking and snorting—maybeso ashamed to have his sweetie see him get such a fall. A couple of days later I rode *him* up the trail, and one of the other waddies in the outfit rode the mare up to the breaking corral. . . .

About four days later we rode the two of them down to where we had set a trap in a blind canyon—and waited. We grabbed the whole herd. There were sixty-eight of them.

And Phil Lewis may not be Phunny Phil, but I'll lay sixteen to one it's one

(Continued on page 138)

To the man who wants to enjoy an ACCOUNTANT'S CAREER

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $2,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained.* It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

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For your own good, don't put off investigation of *all* the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. Send us the coupon *now.*

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A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

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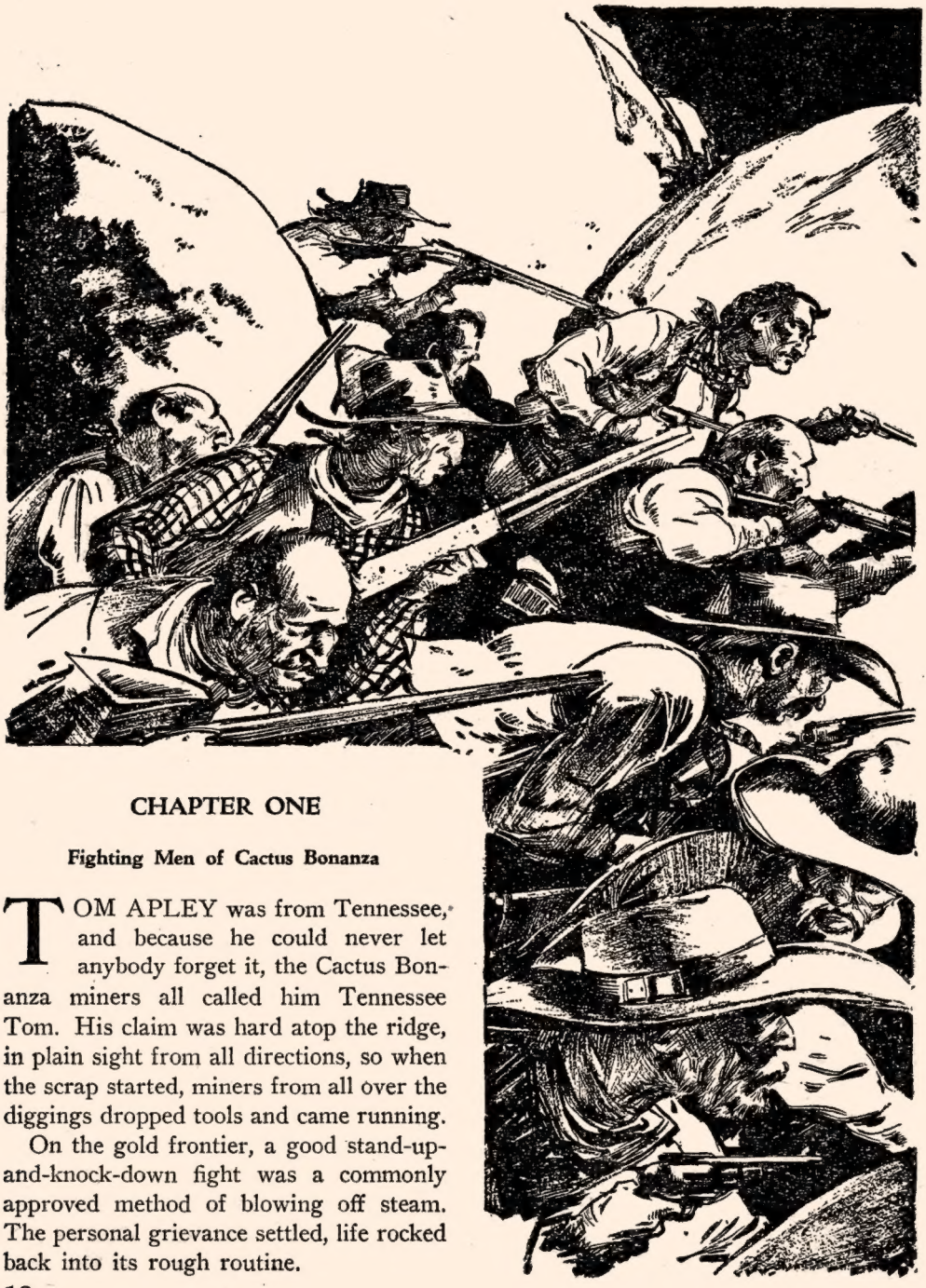
I want to be an accountant. Send me, without cost or obligation, the 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays," and full information about your accountancy training program.

Name.....

Address..... *City*.....

Position..... *Age*.....

★ LEN SIRINGO'S GOLD-CAMP ARMY



CHAPTER ONE

Fighting Men of Cactus Bonanza

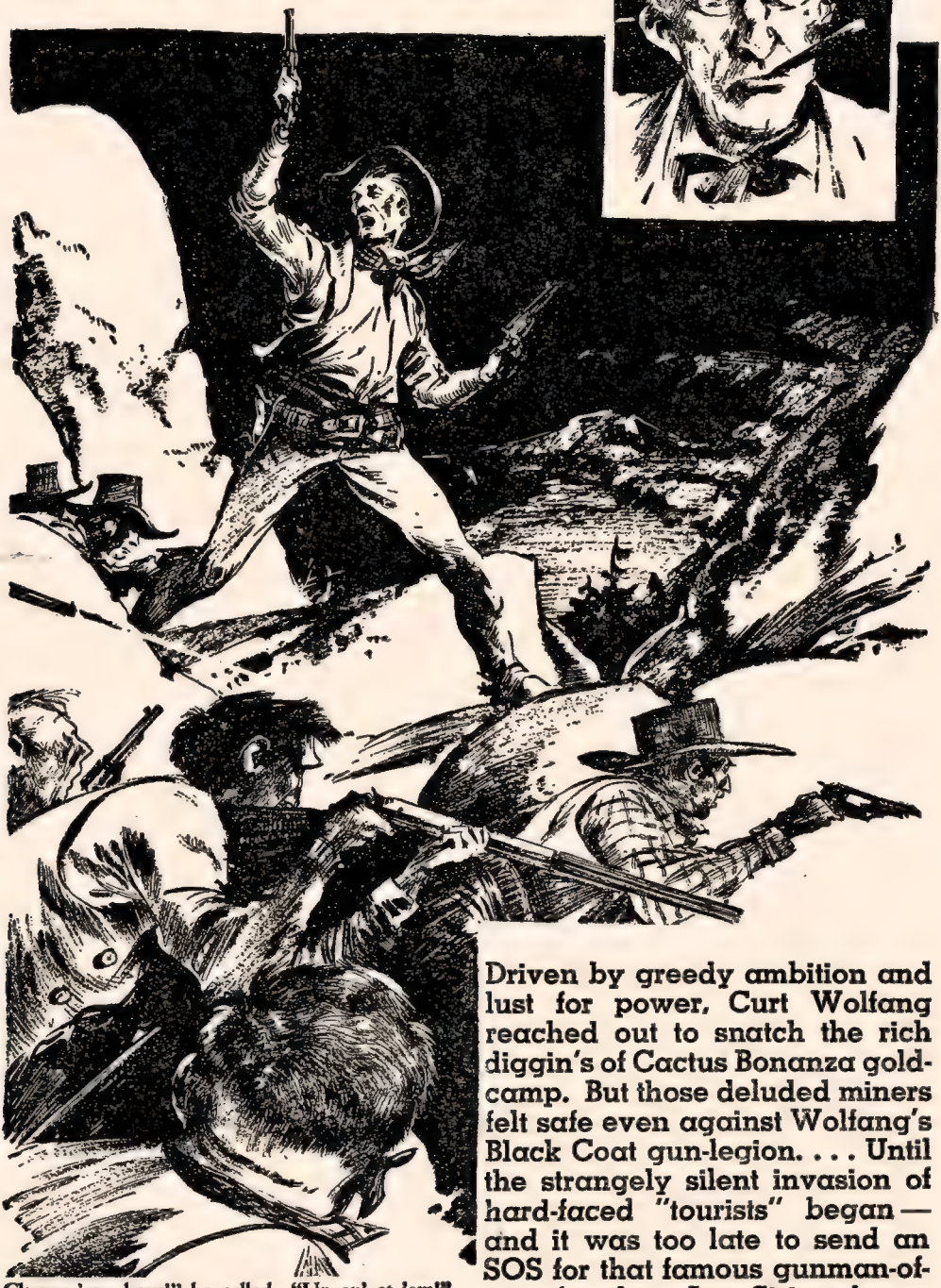
TOM APLEY was from Tennessee, and because he could never let anybody forget it, the Cactus Bonanza miners all called him Tennessee Tom. His claim was hard atop the ridge, in plain sight from all directions, so when the scrap started, miners from all over the diggings dropped tools and came running.

On the gold frontier, a good stand-up-and-knock-down fight was a commonly approved method of blowing off steam. The personal grievance settled, life rocked back into its rough routine.

Powerful Novel of the Famous "Gunman of Freedom"

By

W. Ryerson Johnson



Charge 'em, boys!" he called. "Up an' at 'em!"

Driven by greedy ambition and lust for power, Curt Wolfang reached out to snatch the rich diggin's of Cactus Bonanza gold-camp. But those deluded miners felt safe even against Wolfang's Black Coat gun-legion. . . . Until the strangely silent invasion of hard-faced "tourists" began — and it was too late to send an SOS for that famous gunman-of-freedom, Len Siringo!

But this fight was something different. It didn't settle anything. It only started something. Cactus Bonanza miners had no way of knowing, of course, but before the last echoes of the fracas had sifted away on the desert wind, every man-jack of them would be tragically involved, all would stand to lose their gold holdings, and many would be dead.

It was two against one in the fight. Miners of the Cactus Bonanza diggings were fiercely loyal to each other. They would have been disposed to step in and help Tennessee Tom, especially since the gun-belted pair he mixed it with were outsiders, and from the hard, shifty-eyed looks of them, not even miners.

But Tom wasn't needing help. Not at the beginning. The first miners to come up saw Tom's big fist swing from the side, like a scythe, and knock one of his opponents heels over applecart until he brought up against a bank of prickley pear cactus. Then, with the joyful lust of an aroused hillman, Tom turned to dress down the second man.

This man was bigger than Tom, and from the way he handled himself it was easy to see he had some knowledge of barroom scrapping. Tom came in, arms flailing, and the other man set himself, brought up his fist, and practically let Tennessee Tom knock himself out against it. The man put his other fist in a short vicious punch to Tom's stomach, and topped it by lifting a knee and trying for the groin.

Tom grabbed the knee, hefted, and sagged forward. The man crashed down with Tom on top. They rolled on the rocky slope, gasping and pummeling. The man gouged at Tom's eye, missed, raked his hand down and got a secure thumb grip inside Tom's cheek. But before he could tear the cheek, Tom bit the thumb half through. Blood spurted. The man cursed, started a frenzied short-armed battering at Tom's face.

Tom finished everything by drawing away and smashing his fist back in an open-face blow that knocked his opponent's head against hard rock. The man went limp, and Tennessee Tom staggered up—to be confronted by the first man, whom he had knocked sprawling against the cactus.

The man had drawn his gun. His eyes stared, and his mouth was twisted in a killer's snarl. While Tom had been fighting, close-locked with his opponent on the ground, the gunman had no chance to put in a bullet.

Now Tom was in the clear, and unarmed. The gunman leveled down. His gun blared. Close-up, he couldn't miss. . . .

But he did miss. At least four miners fell on him, and his lead bore into the ground. The miners tore most of the clothes off the gunner before they finished with him. Then they sent them both packing, without their guns and without their horses.

They ringed Tennessee Tom then, crowding him with questions.

"What started it, Tom?" probed Mat Spisling, who had a valley claim to the north of Tom's. "What'd them sidewinders want?"

"They wanted my claim," Tom said.

"You mean in broad daylight, with half a hundred of us here, they tried to jump your claim?"

"Naw, not that exactly," Tom said, still breathing hard. "They offered to buy it."

"What kind of money?" old man Greenleaf wanted to know.

"Chicken feed. And when I wouldn't sell, they started makin' threats. Claimed afore long me and everybody else would be *glad* to sell—an' at their own figger. I told 'em to get the hell off my place . . . then the fight started."

"Who are they?" Mat Spisling asked.

"Claimed they represented Curt Wolfang from over on Rainbow Crick."

Another stir went the rounds of the miners. A cloud shadow fell across the ground, soaking up the sun and moving on over tumbled hills and valleys, moving south. It was twenty miles to the south of here where the Rainbow Creek diggings were located.

Don't shape up so good, does it?" Jacob Milford asked. "You all know who Curt Wolfang is. And you know Rainbow Crick." The miner rubbed at his stubbled jaw, his eyes flinty. "Some of us are refugees, you might say, from there. It ain't been so long ago that the Rainbow diggin's was just like these, with every man owin' his own claim and workin' it to please himself, blowin' his money drinkin' and gamblin' if he wanted, or savin' him up a stake. Once, life was uncommon good there—like it is here today.

"Then Curt Wolfang come in. He was ambitious—big ambitious. He never stopped till he'd hogged the whole diggin's. The gold his harpy women and tinhorn gamblers couldn't get fer him, his gunmen did. Now Rainbow Crick is workin' fer Curt Wolfang. Oh, men are still workin' on their own claims—only fer starvation wages, with the heft of the gold goin' to Wolfgang. He calls it *coördinatin'* the diggin's. But them that get coördinated, calls it jus' a plain gungrab. Now it looks like Curt Wolfang's ambitions is reachin' out to us here. 'Pears like he's fixin' to give Cactus Bonanza the benefits of his community coördinatin'."

"He can't get away with it!" Mat Spisling declared. "He took 'em one at a time in Rainbow Crick, afore they knowd what he was up to. But Cactus Bonanza is forewarned. Here we'll stick together. Buck him with a solid front. He won't get even a toe-hold in here."

"I hope you're right," Jacob Milford said. But his tired eyes were on the cloud shadow that had spread now all the way to the northern horizon. "It was jus' a ball o' vapor no bigger'n your fist when it started," he muttered. "I was lookin' up. I seen it. Now it covers the sky."

Mat Spisling frowned. "Talk louder, Jake. I can't hear you."

"Don't matter," Jacob Milford rubbed again at his stubbled jaw, his eyes as distant as his voice.

Most of the miners figured he was thinking of his two boys, shot down by Curt Wolfang's gunmen while they defended their claim back at Rainbow Creek. Jake got these absent-minded spells now and then.

He laughed harshly. "You're right, Mat," he said. "We'll stick together. We won't give that sidewinder even a toe-holt in Cactus Bonanza."

Three days later Curt Wolfang was feeling for his toe-hold . . . .

★

THE gold camp of Cactus Bonanza was well named. The holes went down in the midst of the God-awfulest collection of cactus of all kinds that probably existed between Texas and California. And the camp was a bonanza from the start. It was beginning to put down permanent roots. Besides the Gay Dog Saloon, there was a livery barn, restaurant, combination barber shop and general store, and a printing office.

The printing office in particular wasn't much to brag about. It consisted merely of a few cases of type and an old Washington hand press which Caleb Weatherspoon, a mouselike little man behind his green eyeshade, had freighted in from Missouri.

Caleb worked a gold mine the same as everyone else. But he had enough printer's ink in his veins so that every so often, when the news stacked up on him so high it made his conscience hurt, he struck off an issue of the *Cactus Bonanza Bugle*. It wasn't any great shakes as an example of journalistic art, but it did have

one strong virtue. It printed the truth as Caleb saw it; and he wore no man's collar but his own.

Caleb was printing his paper on the day Curt Wolfang came.

A shadow fell across his type case, and Caleb looked around. A man stood teetering in the doorway. The man looked average; neither tall, nor heavy. Black coat, and black trousers tucked inside his boots. White shirt. A gun belt and holstered sixgun, which he made no attempt to conceal, beneath his loose coat.

Then the stranger took off his black sombrero, and started fanning himself with it. With the hat off, a shock of straw-colored hair flopped over his forehead almost to his eyes. Caleb noticed the eyes then. There was nothing ordinary about them. Pale blue, and flat appearing, they seemed alternately dead, and fired with a frightening energy.

With those pale eyes stabbing Caleb Weatherspoon, the man moved forward, walking deliberately, putting his feet down flat with every step.

"Hot today," he said. His voice was a guttural scraping. "I'm Curt Wolfang, and I want some hand bills printed."

"Printin's my business," Caleb told him.

"Here's what I want the bills to say." Curt Wolfang put on his hat, took a piece of paper from his pocket, thumped it with his hand, and presented it to Caleb.

Caleb scanned the lines. An angry red crept into his face.

Curt Wolfang started talking then, the words jamming from his lips with such sputtering violence that Caleb jumped as though he had been shot.

"The scum of the earth in Cactus Bonanza! No manners and no sense! Imbeciles, prairie-dog trash. Isn't it the truth, printer?"

"Huh?" Caleb Weatherspoon said, and started twisting his hair around his inky finger.

Curt Wolfang's voice toned down almost to a crooning. "I extended them my hand. I—Curt Wolfang—sent my emissaries to treat with them. And what did they do?" Curt Wolfang drew himself up so far he bent backwards. He was ridiculous, certainly, but somehow frightening, too, in his unbridled, savage energy.

He shouted, "I'll tell you what they did! They fell upon my men. They beat them. They tore the clothes from their backs. They stole their guns and their horses. They spurned me!"

"Oh, that," Caleb Weatherspoon said. "I remember."

Curt Wolfang reached both hands to the ceiling and clenched them. He trembled through his whole body. "What they need is a strong man. Isn't it the truth, printer?"

"Oh, I guess they're doin' all right," Caleb muttered. "Haven't heard any of 'em kickin'."

Curt Wolfang wasn't listening. "What they need is coördinating. Vigor through gladness! I go now to await them at the saloon. Print the announcement, printer. I hold you personally responsible for seeing that every man in Cactus Bonanza reads it!"

Curt Wolfang clicked his heels in a kind of military gesture. Turning, he stalked flat-footed from the room.

Caleb Weatherspoon stood staring after him, vigorously curling his hair. "Well, I'm a monkey's uncle!" he said.

He never did print the hand bills. Without even removing his eyeshade or his apron, he tore out of the print shop and headed for the diggings back of town.

★

JACOB MILFORD, who had had his two sons killed in Curt Wolfang's coördinating program for Rainbow Creek, was the first man Caleb met. To-

gether they read Wolfang's announcement. It was short and direct:

> I have established temporary regional headquarters at the Gay Dog Saloon. I shall expect every man in Cactus Bonanza to come there at once and sell me his claim. This is your last chance to settle peaceably. Cactus Bonanza can and will be coördinated. Look at Rainbow Creek. Vigor through gladness.
> Signed: Curt Wolfang.

"What is this-here now vigor-through-gladness stuff?" Caleb Weatherspoon wanted to know.

Jacob Milford's face was bleak. "I dunno. He was spoutin' it in Rainbow Crick too. Nobody seems to know. I doubt even if he knows. Jus' a spoutin' of words, I reckon, to cover his murders and gun-grabs. There's some that thinks the man's stark ravin' mad, but that don't make him any less dangerous. We laughed at him when he first made his brag that he was goin' to take over the hull of Rainbow Crick. But we don't laugh now. He took it over. Now he's honin' fer Cactus Bonanza. And after that . . . . Sometimes I think the man's delusions place him hard astride the hull of the West!"

"But the first he's got to take Cactus Bonanza," Caleb Weatherspoon said hoarsely. "Come on, Jake. We'll spread the news. Get the men together."

Jacob Milford's memory was still tortured by the things he had seen in Rainbow Creek. "What *can* we do?" he asked tragically.

Most of the men were still asking themselves that question when the first contingent of Cactus Bonanza miners came into the Gay Dog Saloon.

Curt Wolfang was seated behind a round-topped poker table with his back to the wall. The table was stacked to the breaking point with silver dollars. Hard-eyed men wearing black coats and black sombreros were stationed about the big room.

"Must of been a fire sale somewheres on black hats and coats," Caleb Weatherspoon muttered.

"Easy," Jacob Milford cautioned. "Them's Curt Wolfang's gun-guards. His Black Coats, he calls 'em. He drills 'em like soldiers. But they mostly kill from the back. Them two on each side of him are his right and left bowers. The big one with the fancy vest across his pork-paunch and the gold log chain fastened to his watch in Herb Horning. The little dried-up one with the fidgets, they call Big-Mouth Gobble."

The miner's voice broke, but he caught control again. In a dry-husk whisper he said, "Gobble shot one of my boys. I seen him do it." His head jerked to indicate a blank-faced, gimlet-eyed man near the door. "That's Hatchet Immler. He shot my other boy."

From behind his table stacked with silver dollars, Curt Wolfang suddenly stood erect and raised his arm straight out. "Silence," he barked. "Silence, all over the room!"

He waited until he got it, his round moon face impassive. Then he smiled, but that curve of his lips brought no warmth to his brooding eyes. "I'm glad to see you respond so well to discipline," he barked again. "Maybe you have learned your lesson. For your own good, I hope so!" His hand made a sweep at the silver dollars stacked on the table. "I have here money! That's what you want, isn't it? That's what you grub sixteen hours a day for? You'll be glad to know that those days are past. No longer need you take the risk of finding your own money. I give it to you for your claims. One hundred dollars for each claim—"

Not even the presence of the Black Coats could stifle the roar of protest that went up from the assembled miners.

Again Curt Wolfang raised his hand, leaning forward in a show of energy that brought his straw-colored hair flopping over one eyes. He let the hair stay where

it was, and blared at the top of his voice,

"Silence! Prairie-dog pigs—imbeciles! Some of your claims may doubtless be worth more than a hundred dollars—"

"I took out more'n that yesterday!" a man shouted from the crowd.

"Seize that man!" Curt Wolfang raged.

Two of the Black Coats mingling with the crowd, grabbed the miner, and with a gun to his back, rushed him behind the saloon bar.

"To continue," Curt Wolfang shouted, "the hundred dollars isn't all. That's merely a gift from your leader. In addition you will be allowed to continue working on your claims. You need have no fear of the future. I, your leader, give my personal pledge that you will be fed—"

"What with?" another man bawled from the crowd. "Bullets?"

"Seize that man!" Curt Wolfang raged again. "Make an example of him! Lift him to the bar. Feed him the gun-lead his carrion carcass craves!"

The man who had dared to shout was the printer, Caleb Weatherspoon. With three of the Black Coats chopping their way through the crowd to get at him, the little gray-haired man shouted again:

"Miners of Cactus Bonanza, all together now! *Git 'em!*"

CHAPTER TWO

Cactus Harvest-Hands!

CURT WOLFANG had a sample then of the lengths men will go to stay free. He had supposed the Cactus Bonanza miners had come here, grumbling but with their spirit broken, to accept whatever slave terms he chose to offer. Not a man of them had openly carried a gun. His Black Coat guards had seen to that.

What they hadn't seen were the hideout guns. But they saw them now. Caleb Weatherspoon's clarion shout was the miners' rallying cry. They answered him back with leather-lunged bellows, and they yanked their sixgun sleepers from wherever they were concealed in their clothes.

Which faction fired the first bullet was never afterwards determined. It wasn't important anyway. All that mattered was that the Cactus Bonanza miners entered the fight as one, to battle for their rights as free men.

The gunfire under the low roof was like close thunder. Bullets threaded their lethal paths like forks of lightning. And through it all was the roar that welled from angry throats. And the roar of the fanatical Wolfang. His jaws drooled as he jumped about, urging his Black Coats into the fight. Fragments of his hoarse mouthings pierced the bedlam:

"Vigor through gladness . . . . The community coördinated . . . . Discipline . . . . Force . . . . The big-chief principle . . . ."

What he shouted didn't make much sense on the surface. But the miners understood well enough that his roundabout ravings were only a way of saying slavery. And they weren't intimidated. They bucked into the fight with a savage lust, slugging, slashing with gun barrels, triggering lead when they had a clear target.

The little printer, Caleb Weatherspoon, who had sounded the first battle cry, was the first man to go down.

With three Black Coats rushing him, he stood his ground. One he dropped with a bullet, the second he dropped with a skull-rattling blow from his long-barreled sixgun. But the last of the Black Coats dropped Caleb Weatherspoon with a bullet.

The tide of battle swept over him. The Black Coats were streaming out through doors and windows now. The money table was overturned, the dollars rolling in a silver flood over the floor. Curt Wolfang's guttural voice was silent.

"He's gone out the back door!" a miner shouted.

Men swept in a wave for the door. But Curt Wolfang was already riding, holding low in saddle, spurring hard. All of his Black Coats who were still in condition to ride streamed after him.

Curt Wolfang was never a man to plan a forward move without having a way open for emergency retreat. A Black Coat squad had remained outside at the hitch racks, holding getaway horses in readiness.

"We licked 'em!" Tennessee Tom roared.

"Aye, but we haven't seen the finish of it," Jacob Milford warned.

"We got to organize to hold our own," Mat Spisling said.

Inside the wrecked saloon men were taking sorry stock of their casualties, patching up each other's wounds. Three of the Black Coats were dead. One of the miners was dead, and Caleb Weatherspoon lay on the worn board floor, grievously wounded.

Jed Lump, who had been a horse doctor of sorts before he started mining gold, was doing what he could to ease the gray haired printer. But it was a hopeless job from the start.

Caleb Weatherspoon knew it too. His ink-stained finger was twisting a knot in his hair as he lay there on the floor, his face creased in what men understood to be a smile.

"Jake's right," he warned, "the fight's only started. Curt Wolfang won't quit till he's licked, or got you all tight under his thumb, squashin' the red blood out of you. Tell you what you better do, men. Send for Len Siringo. I'm thinkin' this is more'n you can handle by yourselves.

Miners swapped grim frightened glances. If it were true that this was a job for Len Siringo, then things were more desperate then they had believed.

Len Siringo, lone cruising range detective; Number One law-gunner for all the vast lands west of the Mississippi-Missouri. A fable to those who never seen him, a gunsmoke angel to those whom he had helped. Perhaps he was the most loved, and the most hated, man in the West.

He never took on a job unless it was far beyond the capacity of the local boys. Then he came in, and no man could say when, or from where. He worked in his own mysterious way, and no man could say how. But when he was gone, so were the local gun-toughs gone, and free men everywhere were a little more strongly entrenched in their freedom.

A spasm of pain crossed Caleb Weatherspoon's face. After that he sighed. "I don't feel much now, exceptin' sleepy. But somethin' I got to tell you. That old printin' press of mine has never printed anything that wasn't in the interests of the common man.

"Don't leave it bust its record. Guard it like you would your gold. It can spread the truth better'n a thousand voices, talkin' all at once. But in the hands of the wrong man it can spread lies as well. It can fight for you or against you."

Caleb's voice was weakening. Silently, the flinty-eyed miners of Cactus Bonanza drew closer.

" 'The truth can make you free.' Who said that? Somebody—I disremember. But you remember you heard Caleb Weatherspoon saying it when he lay dyin'."

Men couldn't tell by looking at Caleb's

NEXT MONTH, Charles W. Tyler, creator of Johnny Bates and his side-kick, Sunset, will have, in these pages, one of the most fascinating and thrilling novels of pioneer railroading he has yet written—"Fighting Men of the Union Pacific!" Reserve your copy of the March issue today! On sale February 4th!

tranquil face, but when his fingers quit twisting in his hair, and his ink-stained hand fell back against the floor, they knew, of course. Jacob Milford's eyes were frankly wet as he took off his coat and gently covered the fighting printer's face.

In the days that immediately followed, Curt Wolfang made no further threatening move, and the miners of Cactus Bonanza were lulled into a feeling of security. They didn't send for Len Siringo as Caleb Weatherspoon, dying, had advised.

"What's the use?" Tennessee Tom summed it up. "We're on our toes now. We can handle anything Curt Wolfang can send against us. Why check the bet to Len Siringo? He's only one man, and the West is wide. There must be other hard pressed men somewhere that needs him more."

By general agreement among the miners, part of the money left behind by Wolfang when he decamped, was donated to Mike Hogan to pay for the wreckage that had occurred in his saloon during the fight. The rest of the money was put in a fighting fund.

Only there was no one to fight. The miners held several meetings, and passed resolutions of solidarity, but beyond that there didn't seem to be much to do.

Life droned along . . . . Then one morning two passengers got off the twice-a-week stage from the East who were neither interested in staking out a gold claim, or buying one. They said they were tourists. Cactus Bonanza miners couldn't imagine what tourists would be doing in this outland sand and cactus hell-hole of creation, but they couldn't think of any reason why a man would say he was a tourist if he wasn't, so they took the pair at their word.

THE next stage brought four more tourists, and the one after that brought six. They were cut to about the same pattern. Men of active years, pasty-faced Easterners, wearing derby hats, stand-up collars, and peg-leg trousers. And there was the same certain hard furtiveness about them that branded each one alike.

But the tourists were friendly enough, in a superior way. They flocked everywhere, looking over the diggings during the day, writing down notes and drawing detailed maps for themselves so that—as they jokingly explained—they could find their way back to the saloon if they got caught out after dark.

At night they congregated in the saloon. They all had money and they spent it freely, buying drinks for any miner who would drink with them, saying little, but asking many questions and listening rabbit-eared at everything a miner had to talk about.

They seemed particularly impressed with stories of the late battle with Curt Wolfang and his pack. They rubbed their fingers wonderingly over places where bullets were still imbedded in the walls, asked a lot more questions, and expressed concern and solicitude for the plight of the miners.

But after the novelty of having the tourists around began to wear off, some friction developed between them and the miners.

"They're too pesky nosey . . . always around under your feet," Old Man Greenleaf expressed it.

The upshot was that after a few verbal altercations between tourists and miners, and a couple of drag-out fist fights, most of the miners served notice on the tourists to keep off their claims. But the tourists soon found a way to get around that. The arrival of the next stage from the East fixed things for them . . . .

Tennessee Tom Apley happened to be on hand when the stage wheeled in and creaked to a stop. The rawboned miner stood there, gaping in disbelief at what he saw step down from the stagecoach.

He watched a moment, then moved down the street with a look on his face as though he might be seriously thinking of signing the pledge.

He met Mat Spisling and stopped the miner short.

"Mat," he said, "you think you've seen everything, don't you? Since these coconut hatted apes that calls theirselves tourists come flockin' in here, you think you've seen everything."

"Well, ain't I?" Mat Spisling wanted to know.

"Mat, you ain't seen nothin'! You know what got off the stage a minute ago?"

"More tourists?" Mat guessed, cocking an eye toward the empty stage.

"Yeah, some more o' them. But somethin' else too." Tennessee Tom lowered his voice in mocking awe. "A cactologist."

"A what?"

"A cactologist."

Mat stared suspiciously. "What's that?"

"I dunno. Sounds like it might have somethin' to do with cactus, don't it?"

"Cactologist. I never heard of one. You been drinkin' so early this mornin'?"

"No, but I'm goin' to," Tennessee Tom declared. "I heard this critter plain, in a voice like a deep-bellerin' bull, introduce hisself to the stage agent as a cactologist. Then he headed towards the Gay Dog. Come on."

They pushed through the green shuttered saloon doors just in time to hear an unbelievably deep voice rumble, "Bartender, my card. Introducing Professor John Macomber Moan, consulting cactologist for the Triple-Twist Cactus-Spine Barbed Wire Company of Kankakee, Illinois."

"What'd I tell you?" Tennessee Tom whispered hoarsely.

Mat Spisling didn't hear him. He was staring open-mouthed at the apparition leaning against the bar.

The "cactologist" was a long lanky individual who looked as though he were put together in angular parts. He wore a coat as black as those worn by Curt Wolfang and his gun-guards. But instead of a black sombrero he wore a dinky straw hat perched on his head. His legs were encased in what appeared to be black metal tubes. His arms from wrists to elbows were likewise sheathed. He wore an ornate belt of Mexican hand-tooled leather. Tucked inside the belt along his thigh, where a man might have worn a holster, he had a pair of oversized, wire-reinforced gauntlets.

Tennessee Tom couldn't stand the suspense. Scuffing across the sawdust floor, he reached down and tapped his hand against the stranger's legs. His hand made a *tinging* sound, as though it had struck something like a kettle lid.

The stranger spoke in his deep-throated rumble, "It's what it looks like, friend—stovepipes! Exquisitely fitted in my cactological laboratory and swivel-joined to give my limbs full functional movement."

"Stove pipe pants!" Tennessee Tom gasped. "Yeah—now I've seen everything!"

The tourists and the few miners who weren't at the disggings were crowding around.

"What's the idea?" a tourist demanded.

"Cactus armor," Professor Moan informed. He hooked a heel on the bar rail and faced them. "It permits me to go freely among the cacti, without fear of scratch or prickle."

"You—spend much time among the—cacti, Professor?" a marveling tourist asked.

"My dear fellow, my whole life is devoted to the cactus. I live cactus. I breath it and eat it—"

"I git it," Tennessee Tom Apley burst in. "You're a travelin' side-show. Like them yahoos that eats glass and swallows swords. You eat cactus instead. Sounds

like a good act, mister. You can sell me a ticket any day in the week. You got stovepipes inside your stummick too?"

"No, no, you don't understand," the professor explained patiently. "Look, my good man, do you realize that you are living in the midst of a veritable cactus paradise? Cactus Bonanza, you have named your camp, and it is well named. The fame of it has spread afar, as witness these tourists who have come to pry and prowl. As witness myself. It is well known in the halls of science and the marts of commerce that the greatest aggregation of cacti in the West is located here in Cactus Bonanza. That is why I am here —to seek the cactus, to reap it, to stack it under your desert sun where your desert wind can dry it—and then to bale it and take it away."

"You come here to carry away cactus —by the bale? What fer?"

★

PROFESSOR MOAN looked astounded. "My good man, is it possible you have never heard of the new barbed wire? What is nature's own defense against the predatory forces of the West? I'll tell you. Cactus barbs—not wire barbs! Did you ever see a cactus growing wire barbs? No, you never did. And who is the barbed wire business to think that they can improve upon nature? As a mother's milk is to a suckling child, so are cactus barbs to the fence business!

"In brief, a new method has been devised whereby cactus barbs will replace wire barbs in barbed wire fencing. It will revolutionize the fencing business. It will make a fortune for anyone fortunate enough to be in on the ground floor. But don't misunderstand me. I am not a stock salesman for the Triple-Twist Cactus-Spine Barbed Wire Company of Kankakee, Illinois. I am only their field man and consulting cactologist. Though, of course, if some of you should be interested in acquiring a substantial block of stock, I might be able to use my influence; though mind you, I make no promises. The stock issue was ninety-two percent subscribed for before I left Kankakee. It is more than possible that e'er now—"

Professor Moan broke off as a man pushed through the batwing doors up front, and stopped, stock-still and staring. The man was one of the first tourists who had arrived at Cactus Bonanza and he was staring glassy-eyed at the stovepipe professor.

"You!" the tourist grated. "I thought you were—"

"Dead!" Professor Moan finished it for him. Then in a voice so chilling that it was hard to believe it was the glib cactologist talking, he added, "You will be, if you say one more word!"

The professor pushed out from the bar and started walking toward the tourist. In his stovepipe armor he walked like some disjointed mechanical monster. The stovepipe joints creaked, and there was no other sound in the room.

For the first time now men were noticing the professor's face. His outlandish get-up had held their attention before. But now . . . .

His eyes held them rigid. They were oddly hypnotic; pits of black flame in his long angular face. His lips were a hard straight line, and his immense hawk-beak nose seemed to cleave his face in two.

The tourist in front of the bat wings shouted, "Stop him!" in a voice stark with what seemed to be terror. "He's not what he says! I can tell you—"

The man quit talking. In a burst of action his hand spirited a knife from somewhere within his clothes. He threw it with shuddering force.

It was a short throw. The blade glinted as the knife turned on its accurate drive for the chest of Professor John Macomber Moan.

But it wasn't a flesh-chunking thud that broke on the air. It was a metallic clinking as the professor in full forward stride lifted his arm and deflected the blade against his stove-pipe armor plate. The knife clattered against the floor and slithered through the sawdust the width of the room.

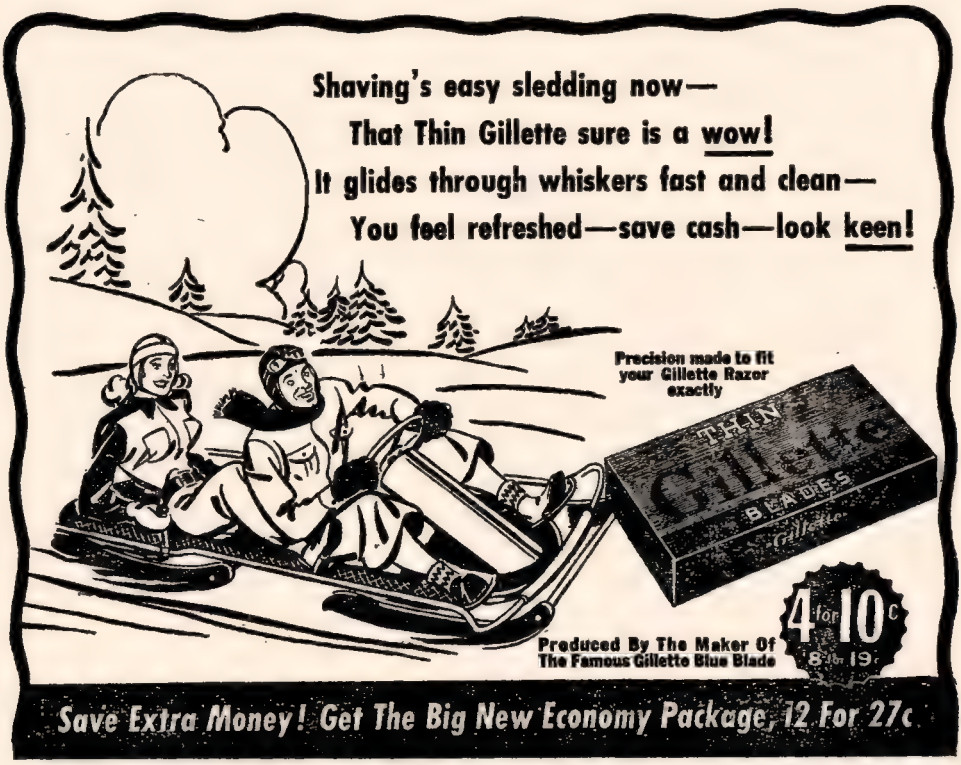
The tourist, face savage, grabbed again within his clothes, and crouched with a stub-barreled derringer in hand. The professor's stove-pipe armor could never stop gun lead.

But the professor's armor had no need to stand the test. The professor, too, was grabbing, from one of those oversized gauntlets that hung from his belt. Those closest could see that the gauntlet was, in fact, an improvised holster. But the gun he flashed into view was no derringer. It was a full-sized six.

The tourist had started his draw first. But remarkably it was the professor's gun which threw first lead. He shot once, and the tourist shot once. But the tourists's lead drove into the floor almost at his own feet. Then the tourist's gun dropped. Then the tourist dropped, his head sagging, knees bending, and his limp body turning in a grotesque corkscrew motion. He hit the floor in a sagging heap and lay there while his life's blood seeped into the sawdust.

A laugh tore through the silence. It was another of the tourists. He didn't know he was laughing. It was only a panicky sort reflex cackling. Neither then nor later, as long as Professor John Macomber Moan remained at Cactus Bonanza, did any man laugh at him and mean it.

The professor returned his sixgun to his gauntlet holster and dusted his hands. "As I was saying, I am not a stock salesman. Apparently our dead friend was under the misapprehension that I had so claimed." From an inside pocket of his


Shaving's easy sledding now—
That Thin Gillette sure is a wow!
It glides through whiskers fast and clean—
You feel refreshed—save cash—look keen!
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THIN
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black coat he yanked a stogy, fitted it to his lips. "Where's the hotel in this town?"

Tennessee Tom Apley was the first to catch his voice. "Hotel's full to bulgin', Professor. But some the tourists are bedded in box stalls at the livery barn. I'd admire to steer you there."

"Lead on, my friend," the professor said.

Tennessee Tom was burning with curiosity about the professor. Walking along Tom tried to draw him out. "Never seen a holster like yourn, Professor."

"I left rather suddenly on this trip," Professor Moan confided. "Hardly knew where to turn in the East to purchase a holster. I had been advised to bring the gun; that rattlers lurked in the cactus."

"Mebbyso you jus' shot one of 'em," Tennessee Tom muttered. "Never did like that snoopin' tourist . . . . Appears like you didn't either. Mebbyso you met him before?"

"Mebbyso," Professor Moan echoed, and changed the subject. "Where can I hire some men to cut cactus for me?"

"I dunno," Tom said. "Don't think you're goin' to have much luck. Everybody here's diggin' gold. They can make more money that way, I reckon, than by choppin' down cactus."

"What about the tourists? Can I get some of them to work for me?"

"Naw, they wouldn't do no work for nobody."

The way it turned out, Tennessee Tom was wide on that one. The tourists took to Professor Moan's proposition like ducks to water.

They started in that very day, armed with leather gloves and heavy bladed machetes, rakes, and pitchforks which the professor provided from his cactological equipment cases. They didn't set any world's record for speed, but they did swarm all over the territory, cutting cactus.

"All kinds of cactus," the professor instructed them. Prickley pear, cholla—anything that's got thorns on it. I'll freight it all back to Kankakee and we'll do some research on it in our laboratories to find out which cactus thorns are the best for fence barbs."

The miners could never got over the wonder of seeing the tourists work.

"Somethin' sure smells fishy about it," old man Greenleaf growled. "Specially since them tourists at first was all hollerin' the professor ought to be hung fer shootin' down one of 'em with that lucky shot of his'n in the saloon."

But whatever the reason, the tourists worked. A box canyon that went by the name of Redskin's Folly, debouched into the diggins from the north. The professor had the tourists cart the cactus to the top of the canyon and spread it out along the rim of both sides.

"Gets more wind up here," he explained, when they grumbled. "Dries the cactus out quicker, takes up the shrink. That's necessary so's the barbs don't loosen after they're set in the wire."

Every day he had them turn it over with pitchforks in the manner of a farmer sunning his hay.

But one of the tourists did no harvesting of cactus. He was a shriveled-up little man with a wide mouth who had a habit of starting to talk a mile a minute, and then stopping suddenly, as though his mouth hurt. He was nervous, jumpy as a jackrabbit. He had a slinky look in his eyes. He wore a mustache as wide as his wizened face. Nobody liked him. Not even the tourists. Some of the miners had an uneasy feeling they should know him.

This tourist spent most of his time with the printing press that had belonged to Caleb Weatherspoon. The press seemed to fascinate him. He said he had been a printer's devil when he was a boy, and he secured permission from a delegation of the miners to experiment with the old hand press. He promised to print them a

free paper as soon as he got back his knack of typesetting. Some of the miners remembered something Caleb Weatherspoon had said about guarding the press as closely as they would their gold, because the truth could make them free. But they didn't see what harm the tourist's meddling could do.

It was Mat Spisling who brought the whole puzzling tourist question to a showdown. He passed out the word to the miners to meet that night at his diggings. He was very mysterious about it. And alarming.

He contacted every miner in the camp, swore them to secrecy about the meeting, instructed them to come as soon as they could move without being seen, under cover of darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

"Here Come the Black Coats!"

THEY came to the meeting, straggling in singly, and by twos and threes. They were inclined to take the meeting somewhat as a joke. But it wasn't a joke to Mat Spisling. He was continually cautioning them to hold their voices down, and to put out their cigarettes. They didn't see the need for the admonition, since Mat Spisling's claim was in the canyon bottom, and the dirt and rock he had thrown up to all sides further cut off vision.

"This is like meetin' in somebody's cellar," a miner grumbled. "How's anybody goin' to see a match flare from in here?"

"We can't take even the puniest chances," Mat said bitterly. "Gawd knows *they* ain't."

"Who ain't?"

"You'll find out. Wait till the boys are all here."

Later, with the miners all accounted for, Mat Spisling said, "Hunker in close, boys, and listen good to what I'm tellin' you." Mat's voice was low, but a little hoarse and hollow sounding. "You all been wonderin' why the tourists are workin' for this sad-faced gent that calls himself a cactologist. Here's why. On account it gives 'em a good chance to spy on us. We warned 'em all off our diggin's. But scrousin' the country fer cactus, it gives 'em a chanct to keep their eyes on us again."

Questions came at him. "How do you know?"

Spyin' on us fer what?"

"One at a time," Mat said. "I know because I found stuff written down in one of their notebooks that they all carry. One of 'em was workin' close to here this mornin' and he took off his coat when the sun got hot. I been smellin' a rat all along, so I sneaked the book out of this fella's coat. I'll show it to you soon's we can get where we can risk a light. You won't have no doubts after you see it."

"You mean they're spyin' for the cactologist?"

"Yeah, but it goes farther'n him. He's only their straw-boss. Listen—any you fellas ever hear of a big wooden horse some old-time Greeks made? They made it big enough fer a whole army to git inside and hide. Then they wheeled the horse up outside the gates of some city they wanted to capture. The dimwits in the city opened their gates and took the horse inside."

"Right nice story," a miner chuckled. "Then what happened?"

"Then," Mat Spisling said, "the army climbed down out of the wooden horse and killed every man, woman, and child in the city!"

An uneasy stir rippled among the miners. Old man Greenleaf questioned: "You mean these-here now tourists, that we've invited in to our bosoms, they're like the wooden horse? That what you're drivin' at, Mat?"

"That's exactly what I'm drivin' at."

"Sounds kinda silly," a miner declared. "Who they wooden-horsein' fer?"

"Curt Wolfang!" Mat Spisling said. "And we quit laughin' at him a long time ago."

Silence clamped down over the assembled miners. The night blackness seemed to swadddle about them, a throttling force.

"Curt Wolfang!" a voice muttered hoarsely. "I knowed it wasn't like that sidewinder to quit so easy. But I been hopin' . . . . I reckon we all been hopin' . . . . And we been blind! He's been all the time fattenin' us fer the kill! We'd ought to of sent fer Len Siringo a long time ago. Likely too late now . . . ."

"What you whinin' about?" another demanded harshly. "We licked him before. We'll do it again."

"These tourists is city gunmen! I had a feelin' about 'em all along. They're alley-rat thugs, the lot of 'em. Likewise the professor. A scheme hatched by Curt Wolfang's cunnin' brain. A scheme to butcher us in our beds and take our gold—"

"There's only fifteen of 'em all together," Tennessee Tom horned in. "Our claims are scattered all over hell around here. How they goin' to attack us?"

"They will."

"When?"

"Now!" The fateful word rolled in from the darkness somewhere beyond the gold pit. It wasn't a loud voice, but it was frightening in its reverberating tonal qualities. It had somehow the feel of a tolling funeral bell.

"That's the cactologist!" a miner jabbed.

"Professor John Macomber Moan," the voice rolled in again from the darkness, "in person! I'm only one and you're half a hundred. I couldn't miss, but you could. So don't go off half-cocked anybody, and start throwin' lead around in the dark."

"We're trapped!" a miner cried.

"Correction," the professor's voice sounded back. "You aren't yet. But you mighty soon will be if you don't swarm out of that death-hole you're in down there. The tourists know you're all here. They're on the way now. It's their plan to surround the hole in the darkness and start blastin' down without warnin'. They figure those who aren't killed will be terrified into knucklin' under to anything Curt Wolfang wants to put across . . . . I come ahead to warn you."

"It's a trick!" Mat Spisling's desperate voice sounded. "The cactologist's the worst hellion of the bunch. He's the one hirin' and directin' the tourists!"

Some of the miners were too stunned to move or talk. But others echoed Mat Spisling's warning.

PROFESSOR JOHN MACOMBER MOAN spoke again, his voice a hushed burring this time. "The tourists are bearing down close. I can hear 'em from up here. Forget about me. I'm not important at the moment. Only thing that matters is for you all to swarm out of that pit. Swarm my direction or the other direction. Swarm anywhere. But swarm —*fast!*"

"The professor's right!" Tennessee Tom low-voiced his agreement. "Leastways, we got to chance it. What we got to lose? Mebbyso we butt into his trap if we rare up out of here. But we're already in one while we're here. Might as well be shot fer a goat as a wooden horse. Me, I'm gettin' out of here."

"Me too," another blurted.

Others suddenly became of a similar mind. There was a concerted rush away from the pit bottom. From above, in the direction the professor's voice had sounded a moment before, a sixgun roared, jetting pale flames into the night. From further beyond came answering gun

blasts. Bullets whined through the air above the gold pit.

"Come on, boys!" Tennessee Tom shouted.

He threw himself down behind a pile of excavated rock and started shooting, aiming at the in-drawing gun flashes. One and all, they holed in at the top of the gold pit and started slamming lead.

The guns that had crashed from out on the slope stopped coming closer. They still blasted their leaden death, but it was evident that the gunners, meeting the unexpected volley of the miners, had taken cover.

For stark minutes the hill shook to the gun-thunder, and lead laced the air in lethal lines, plunking into the dirt heaps, spanging from rock, driving overhead with a hornet whine.

"This is gettin' nobody nowhere," Tennessee Tom bawled.

Then from the darkness so close at hand that it made half the miners jump, the fog-horn bellowing of Professor John Macomber Moan sounded.

"Charge 'em, boys! Follow me. Up and at 'em! Come on!"

Dimly in the night they could see the tall lank figure of the cactologist as he reared up from where he had been crouching among them. They hadn't even known he was there. But now they cheered and swarmed after him.

An over-zealous gun blared from close behind him.

"Easy, there," Tennessee Tom warned angrily. "You'll shoot the professor!"

They lost sight of the professor after that. But at intervals as they charged into the tourists' guns, they heard his deep-mouthed bellow, urging them on. The lead that laced the night with stitches of unseen death, sewed on a narrower strip of darkness as the miners closed in. The savage drive and whine of slugs became louder in their ears, and here and there a man cursed or ground out words of pain.

But still the miners came on, gunning as they ran. They reached the place where the tourists had been holed in. But except for three who lay there dying, the miners never did reach the tourists. Those plug-hatted gunmen backed away as the miners closed in. They scattered, running, into the night.

Morning found them vanished completely from the landscape.

But morning found something else for the miners to worry about. Something which fell on them like a blight, showing them that even now they had settled nothing, that in fact, their struggle had barely begun. The full force of the disasterous revelation didn't dawn all at once. At first the miners were merely surprised.

They got up in the morning and each man found a new issue of the *Cactus Bonanza Bugle* thrown down in front of his diggings. The more imaginative among them fought down a feeling of close impending doom even as they reached for the paper. Perhaps it was because of their recollectioin of the wizened slinky-eyed tourist who had spent his time in the print shop while the other tourists were harvesting cactus.

At first glance the fateful paper concerned itself with local news. It was, the miners grudgingly admitted, a better gotten-up paper than the one Caleb Weatherspoon used to put out.

But then, one and all, they read something which they knew would have made the fighting printer turn over in his grave. It was a small item in the middle of the page. It was headed:

ULTIMATUM!

Whereas atrocities have been committed in Cactus Bonanza, to-wit: The persecution and murder of innocent tourists, and whereas there has been a complete breakdown of law and order, it should be apparent to all that a strong man is needed to enforce discipline.

Be it resolved, therefore, that an immediate appeal be made to Curt Wolfang of Rainbow Creek to come to Cactus Bonan-

za for the sole purpose of restoring order.

Signed: Miners' Committee

The miners read with astonishment that was weighted with dread. All over the diggings they gathered in little knots, talking excitedly.

"Who is this Miners' Committee?" Tennessee Tom demanded angrily. "Never heard of it."

Nor had anyone else.

"There's traitors amongst us that would turn us over to Wolfang!" Old Man Greenleaf said starkly.

"Mebby not," Mat Spisling said. "I got a hunch it's the entire doin's of that tourist we let monkey around the printin' press."

"But what's the infernal idea of it?"

They all knew, of course, but it remained for Jacob Milford to put it into words. "It means quick gunsmoke showdown for Cactus Bonanza! It means Curt Wolfang and his Black Coats are maybe on their way right now to wipe us out. I know somethin' about Wolfang from the time when I lived in Rainbow Crick. He's a man who likes to have excuses fer everything. It don't matter how lame the excuses. This appeal, even if he wrote it himself, he'll consider justifies him to come gunnin' down on us.

"It's plain he thought his tourists could take us over. But we sent those tourists packin'. So he had this idea all ready fer a final resort. Now he accuses *us* of incitin' violence and disorder, and he invites himself to step in and take us over!

"That printer, you know who I'm thinkin' it was? If we'd pulled that cowhorn mustache offen him, I'm thinkin' it would of been Curt Wolfang's left-hand bower, Big-Mouth Gobble!"

The miner's hands clenched. His lips were white. "Big-Mouth Gobble the same as killed one of my boys."

"What we goin' to do?" a frightened voice asked. "We're miners, not gunfighters. We can't stand off Curt Wolfang's whole pack in direct attack no more'n Rainbow Crick could. We're sunk!"

"We should of sent fer Len Siringo," a miner jabbed harshly, "like I said a long while ago. Now it's too late."

Too late! The tragic awareness was seeping to every one of them. Curt Wolfang, the conviction grew, was invincible. Each man searched his neighbor's face for some hint of assurance—and found none.

"Here comes that cactologist," one man muttered. It was something to say, and anything was better than the tragic silence which shrouded them.

"He's late this mornin'," another remarked, keeping the talk alive. "He's usually up with the sun."

"He done a nice shootin' job last night," still another offered.

"I ain't so sure about him," Old Man Greenleaf said grimly. "There's somethin' fishy about him. How do we know for sure he ain't some extra tricky plant of Curt Wolfang's?"

"Jus' what I been thinkin'," Mat Spisling said broodingly.

★

PROFESSOR JOHN MACOMBER MOAN was bearing down close now. Silently the miners stood there on the hillside and watched him. He wasn't wearing his stovepipe pants this morning. His lanky body undulated disjointedly as he scuffed close, kicking up dust behind him. He wasn't wearing the ridiculous straw hat either. He had on a battered black sombrero. Between his teeth a long stogy stuck straight out.

He was puffing vigorously, trailing smoke like a locomotive. There was one other change in his get-up. His sixgun now was incased in a well-worn holster, and it hung low.

"Mornin', gents," the professor greeted, as he came up to them and stopped.

They showed him a copy of the *Cactus Bonanza Bugle*.

He brushed it impatiently aside. "I know all about it." He stared at them fiercely for a moment. The slow black fire was working in his eyes, the same fire that had shown in the Gay Dog Saloon the time he had swapped killer lead with the tourist.

He plucked the stogy from his wide mouth. "There's a traitor among you. A sidewindin' sell-out. A sneak that would lead his own friends to the slaughter. A man who's accepted Curt Wolfang's so-called protection and who hopes to rule you under Curt Wolfang's direction after that Black Coat fanatic has taken over Cactus Bonanza . . . . I knew it for sure last night when somebody took a close shot at my back when we started our charge agin' the tourists."

They gaped a him, frozen to silence by something new and strange in his manner, by a quiet power he possessed this morning, by his bold talk.

Then Tennessee Tom Apley got his voice. "Sure, I'm rememberin' that shot. It come from someone near me. I hollered out about it."

"I heard you," the professor said. "But it was dark. You couldn't see who shot."

"That's right. It was too dark."

Old Man Greenleaf snapped at his galluses and cleared his throat. "You—you claimed you knowed about this-here in the paper before we showed it to you. Howcome you knowed?"

Professor Moan opened his mouth in a wide yawn. "That's why I was late gettin' out this mornin'. Overslept, on account I was out last night—watchin' the *Cactus Bonanza Bugle* bein' delivered."

"Huh? You seen that tourist printer deliverin' the paper last night—"

"I seen him, yeah. Only it wasn't no tourist." The professor's eyes ranged bleakly over the group. "It was one of you nine men standin' here. The same one who took a shot at my back last night!"

The professor turned and looked away, as though distracted by something off to one side. He raised his hand to put the stogy back in his mouth. It was his right hand—his shooting hand.

It was too good a chance for one of the nine miners to miss.

Before the others realized what the miner was about, he crouched, slapped his sixgun from leather, and leveled out fast at Professor Moan. Gun-roar broke loud on the desert morning. The reason it blared so deafeningly was that two guns spoke as one.

Incredible as it seemed to the watching miners, the gangling Professor Moan looked back from the distant hillside, dropped his stogy, reached for his gun,

lurched to one side, leveled out—and fired his gun to blend its roar with that other gun which had been snaked from holster to a good head start!

The professor's sidewise lurch was so violent that it threw him to the ground. Mat Spisling was also thrown to the ground. But not because of his own action. It was because of the professor's bullet. Hot from the muzzle, the heavy slug tore at Mat Spisling's chest, clubbed him backwards on his heels, dropped him flopping to the dust, dead before he struck.

Professor John Macomber Moan, consulting cactologist from Kankakee, blew smoke from his gun-barrel, and holstered with a motion so deft that the sock of the iron in leather made the gaping miners blink.

"I reckon it was best this way," the professor said, his huge voice toned to a gentle bur. "I looked away a purpose to give him his chance if he wanted it. He took it—and I took him.

"Part of the reason the tourists were here was to contact somebody that Curt Wolfang could work through in takin' over this camp. Curt Wolfang never stages a frontal attack until he's tried treason. Mat Spisling sold out so complete to him that he herded you all inside his diggin's last night for the killin'. The plan—like I told you when you weren't believin' me—was for the tourists to blast you there without warnin' I found out about it from one of 'em, by puttin' pressure on him. The rest, you know."

"Yeah," Tennessee Tom said excitedly, "the rest we know. I know, anyhow. You ain't no more of a professor or a—a cactologist than what I am. Are you, now? There never was a—cactologist could shoot like that. I don't know howcome you knew we were so sore needin' you. But all the time we were lambastin' ourselves fer not sendin' fer you, you were here! Workin' out things in your own way. Now I'm believin' everything I ever heard about you—"

"Gawsh-a-mighty, yeah!" Old Man Greenleaf took it away from Tennessee Tom. With a kind of sputtering gasp, his faded eyes bulging, he continued. "It's plain now as the nose on your face, Professor. I mean—"

"You mean *Len Siringo!*" a man in back of the crowd shouted.

Len Siringo! Every one of them knew it now, and wondered why he hadn't known it before. They said his name. They liked the sound of it in their ears, the feel of it on their lips. Their eyes glowed. The most talked about man in the West—and the most seldom seen—was here in Cactus Bonanza! A man could move right up and touch him if he wanted to. A man could. . . . And all of them did.

The famous range detective shook the hand with each in turn. "Sorry I couldn't have tipped myself off to you sooner, boys, but there was too much undercover dynamite in town. But from here on out we know who we're fightin'. . . . We *are* fightin', ain't we?"

They came at him with a tumult of yelling cheers. They let him know they were fightining, all right. With Len Siringo's famed ivory-handled peacemakers thrown in on their side the scales, they didn't see how they could lose.

It was just as well they couldn't read the lone-wolf gunner's mind. Len, himself, wasn't so positive. Curt Wolfang was no run-of-the-mill gun-boss. The scales, Len was grimly aware, still trembled in the balance. But a man did what he could. . . .

"Howcome you to be here, Mr. Siringo?" Tennessee Tom probed. Looks like you knowed, even before we knowed it ourselves, that there'd be a job of gunnin' here fer you."

Len smiled somberly. "Reckon I did know it first. I got on the stage at Abi-

lene, and there was some of them tourists headed fer here. Wasn't nothin' about Cactus Bonanza that I ever heard tell of that would attract honest-to-gosh tourists.

"So I kept my ears open, and in the miles that followed I heard enough to learn that Curt Wolfang was importin' 'em. Sounded like it might shape up to be my kind of job. . . . I got off the stage the last blacksmith shop back, and had my stovepipe pants made."

Tennessee Tom nodded and beamed. "You had to operate without these tourists gettin' suspicious. I got to laugh when I think of the way you had 'em scramblin' around harvestin' cactus! Shore was a lot of wasted effort."

"Wasted?" Len shrugged. "Who knows? Everything's on earth for a useful purpose, I reckon—exceptin' maybe Curt Wolfang. How you know I won't start that factory yet? Want to buy some stock, anybody?"

They laughed till the tears ran from their eyes. It was the first genuine relaxing laugh they had had for many a worried day.

Afterwards, in a sobering voice, Len said, "We got to get set to repel invaders immediate. If I got Curt Wolfang sized up right, he'll foller up his ultimatum with a lightnin' attack. He'll swarm down and try to gun us off the map afore we know what's hit us—"

He broke off suddenly at the hoof-clatter of a bronc, hard-ridden. Men looked up. It was a single rider who approached, and he came from the high ridges to the north.

"Looks like Jed Lump," a miner said.

"It is," Len Siringo affirmed. "I've had him perched up there all mornin' with a pair of spy glasses."

Jed Lump started waving his arms as he drew close, and he leaned forward in saddle. "They're comin'! A hull danged army of Black Coats!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Canyon Death-Trap!

THE battle broke as Len Siringo had predicted it would, with Curt Wolfang, his Black Coats, and his tourists riding down on the camp like a band of Comanches raiding a wagon-train. But due to Len's forethought the raiders didn't find the miners scattered helplessly on their claims. They were scattered all right, but in well appointed battle stations selected by Siringo, the high points on the ridge back of camp and the tops of the Gay Dog Saloon, George Becker's general store, and the livery barn.

Cactus Bonanza miners with rifles and sixguns met the fire the Black Coats laid down as they rode close. There weren't many rifles among the miners and the distance was still long for accurate six-gun work. Still, the surprise was complete. The Black Coats' firing dribbled away, as they hauled their horses around on a dime and frantically put more distance between them and the camp.

Cactus Bonanza speeded them with more bullets and set up a cheer as they realized they'd won the first round. Out on the flats beyond the town and diggings, Curt Wolfang gathered his men for a battle parley while the miners watched.

Len Siringo hurried here and there, his message the same to all the jubilant miners.

"Watch sharp. This fight ain't finished. Curt Wolfang's got more tricks'n what a rattler's got scales. Keep him out there on the flats. If he ever gets his men in clost enough to where they can grab cover in the rough rock of the diggin's, they'll burn us out of here. Keep him at a distance. It's our only chanct."

While the miners watched, Curt Wolfang's men unhorsed, scattered out on the flats and came in slow. As they drew

closer they came faster, firing and zigzagging. Mindful of Len Siringo's admonition to "keep 'em at a distance", the miners took cool aim at the raiders and let them have it. They began to take toll. They wounded some in that long volley and they killed others.

Curt Wolfang pulled his men back.

The fight settled down then to a long-range exchange of rifle fire, and the miners were outgunned on the maneuver. With their few rifles they weren't able to do much damage, and some of the Black Coat lead was finding human targets. But the miners, through all the gunning, held to their places, and Curt Wolfang never once succeeded in spotting a man in the good cover strip.

Things went on like this until mid-afternoon, with the miners beginning to feel pretty cocky. Then Len Siringo, coming out into the sunlight from a mine tunnel where he had been checking ammunition stores, stopped in shock.

Squinting to the southeast he could see three ore freighters wheeling steadily toward the town. They were fairly close in, with the lead teams already nosing out of the flats into the heaped rock territory that ringed the town.

"What's them freighters?" Len foghorned. "Burn 'em out of here! Don't leave 'em roll a inch closer!"

"It's all right, Len," a miner delegated as an ammunition carrier, assured. "There's a couple our boys ridin' each wagon. They went out and met the wagons and checked 'em to make sure. We even know the drivers. These wagons has been overdue and we're plumb glad to see 'em. They lug our ore down to Smokytown where the smelter is. The fightin's been all to the north'ard so far. No harm leavin' the wagons through."

The miner had gone on inside the tunnel while he talked. Now he poked his head back out. "By hang," he said, "I'm talkin' to myself!"

He was. Len Siringo was covering ground in his great lumbering stride a good six rods away. But he could have been even closer to the rocking freighters and he would have still been too late. Before his eyes, as he ran toward them, men commenced scrambling frantically out over the high board sides of the wagons. Scuttling among the rock and ore dumps, they lost themselves from view almost immediately.

Almost immediately, then, they announced their positions again—with a volley of deadly close-in fire that caught most of the miners flat-footed.

Len Siringo dropped to the ground, and from the scant cover of a basalt upwelling, answered their volley with blasts from his famous guns. Such of the miners as could be spared from their posts, closed in to help him. But it was the beginning of the end of the battle for Cactus Bonanza.

The miners had a two-front fight on their hands now. Worse than that, with a pack of Curt Wolfang's gunmen holed in behind good close cover, most of the battle stations that had given the miners their all-day advantage became untenable. The miners stuck as long as they could, but they had little protection from the new fire angle. With bullets pelting in like leaden hail, the men on top the general store were the first to give back ground.

The Gay Dog Saloon defenders followed close after them, scurrying over the flat roof, hanging by their hands from the edge and dropping. One man dropped without hanging, when one of the bullets caught him. He went over the side in a limp dive, headfirst onto rough rock.

Tennessee Tom, in charge of the squad holding down the livery barn roof, held his position the longest. But it was a suicide job. Len Siringo motioned for him to come down. Two of Tennessee's men were already bleeding from gunshot

wounds. They had a bad time getting down.

A few of the miners who were holed in behind rock nests on the ridge back of town were able to stick it out a while longer. But the damage had already been done. With the roof tops cleared, it was a cinch for Curt Wolfang's men out on the north flats to come in close and find cover in the diggings.

Caught in a two-way fire, there was nothing left for the miners but to abandon the town completely.

★

LEN led them, bent over and running, to the semi-security of the ridges. There, in a compact group, they made a last stand. There was fair cover on the boulder-strewn, gravel-gutted ridge, but it was defensive cover only. It didn't provide any base for an attack against the stronger positions now held by Curt Wolfang and his Black Coats.

All they could do was hang on here as long as daylight lasted. When night came they wouldn't even be able to do that! Darkness would enable the Black Coats to edge forward to even more favorable positions. They could pour in a blanket of fire that would sooner or later kill every miner on the ridge. There would be nothing for the miners after nightfall except to make a break for it. In the darkness some of them might get through Curt Wolfang's firing lines with their lives. But all would lose their gold. And Curt Wolfang would big-chief it over Cactus Bonanza the same as he did over Rainbow Creek. And life would tend to become a little more hazardous for free men everywhere.

Miners who had gone out to escort the ore wagons in—and who still lived to tell about it—were almost crying in their rage and grief. Most of the escorting miners had been killed outright along with the drivers when the Black Coats first scrambled, gunning, from over the sides of the wagons. But some of the miners had escaped the close driven lead.

Jed Lump was one. "We looked inside the wagons," he explained tragically to Len Siringo where they both crouched in the rock. "But them wagons were empty. Everything seemed all right to us, exceptin' maybe the drivers were a little stiff actin'. We thought they was jus' edgy about comin' so close to the fight. But it's plain now that—"

"Curt Wolfang intercepted the wagons," Len picked it up grimly, "afore they hove in sight of here. He rigged false bottoms in 'em and hid his men underneath—where one of 'em, anyhow, could keep a gun trained on the driver's back. The drivers played his game because they figgered they had to to save their lives. But now they know better—or we do anyhow! The drivers were the first ones killed when the Black Coats deserted the wagons. You can't do business with Curt Wolfang."

"I wish I'd been killed, too!" Jed Lump declared hoarsely.

A bullet slithered in against a shelving of hard rock and sawed through Jed Lump's exposed trousers leg.

"Look sharp!" Len warned, "or you will be." Then in a compassionate voice, "What's done is done. Jus' concentrate now on holdin' these positions till night comes."

"But when night comes, we're *all* doomed!" Jed said desperately.

Len Siringo was already moving away to bring courage and council to miners holed in at other rocky covers along the ridge.

"One thing at a time," Len flung back patiently to Jed Lump. "Our first job is to hold this ridge."

They held it. But as the sun inched down in the western sky, their despera-

tion grew. The sun was a ball of fire at the last which colored half the sky in blazing red, and slanted over the earth to lay down creeping shadows. There was a hellish unreality about it. All the miners felt it. And to all of them came the knife-gouging awareness that, the chances were, it was the last sunset they would ever see.

To the north on the near canyon rim, the sun lighted up the piles of cactus which the tourists had sweatingly harvested for Len Siringo. Men couldn't help but remark now how useless had been that fantastic cactus reaping. As useless as the last stand of the Indian band in earlier years when, battling a hostile tribe, they had fled into the canyon mouth.

They had sought safety there, but to the last man they had found death. The rock-girt canyon was boxed, with no way out of it except by the way the Indians had gone in. Redskin's Folly, the box canyon was called to this day.

Perhaps this debacle at Cactus Bonanza would be known in future years as Len Siringo's Folly. And yet no miner in his heart blamed Len. Some forces welled up, bigger than man's power to stop them. Curt Wolfang. the miners bleakly surmised, was such a force.

But the miners fought on to the last. With the night shadows fingering in, soaking up the last of the day's light, they increased their firing in their determined effort to hold the Black Coats back.

Len Siringo crept from man to man.

"Watch fer my signal. Soon as the night's clamped down a little more, I'll blaze two shots straight in the air. We'll start movin' then, northward. Stay close bunched."

He didn't need to say more. Northward was the region of scantiest cover for Curt Wolfang's gunners. It was the best place for the miners to attempt a break-through. The miners resigned themselves now without reserve to the certainty of their defeat and the loss of their gold. Until now they had held some faint unreasoning hope that somehow, as Len Siringo had done for other sorely oppressed men over the West, the great man would pull a miracle out of his battered old black sombrero.

But as Len's two-shot signal blazed in the early-evening darkness, the miners steeled themselves for their last ignominious play, their crawfish out of Cactus Bonanza against night-winging lead. Some of them muttered to themselves as they humped along. The night wasn't yet as dark as it would be. The way it appeared, Len Siringo was staging his retreat too soon. Before they could work on past the canyon mouth and lose themselves in the black vastness of the desert plains beyond, some of Curt Wolfang's gunners were liable to spot them.

Some of the miners wondered if Len himself had turned a little panicky here at the last, and gone off half-cocked with this retreat. After all, this hadn't been his fight until he had made it his fight. He had no stake here. Maybe he was regretting he had bought in, and was now humanly over-anxious about getting out. The miners couldn't suppress a guilty feeling that accompanied their suspicion. Nothing they had ever heard about Len Siringo would lead them to think he might show up weak in a crisis.

And yet the next development in the battle of Cactus Bonanza seemed to bear out their fears. A loud shout carried through the darkness. An extraordinarily loud shout. Almost the kind of bellow of which Len Siringo himself was capable.

"This way, Black Coats! They're makin' a sneak out this way. We can cut 'em off. This way—and come a-gunnin'!"

More of the Black Coats took up the wolf-pack cry, and from out of the night, guns bloomed and lead started pelting in. The miners, caught without cover, milled in indecision.

Then Len Siringo's voice sounded. "Gun back at 'em, men, and keep movin'. Foller my voice if you can't see me. There's good cover right ahead!"

They did as he said, firing as they ran, and followed Len's voice blindly. They came quickly to a place where Len was making a stand behind a low granite outcrop.

"Duck down here," Len bawled. "Stay bunched. Room fer all of you behind this outcrop. Feed 'em lead!"

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Curt Wolfang's guns were all in front of them, and the outcrop afforded shelter of a sort. But it wasn't long before every miner on the firing line had cooled down enough to take stock of exactly where they were. And they wished they hadn't followed Len's lead so blindly.

★

TENNESSEE TOM'S voice summed up their desperate peril. "You know what this place is? Redksin's Folly! We're squatted smack in the mouth of the canyon. No openin' at the other end. We got to make a break out of here before they push us back in it!"

"Stay put," Len roared. "Keep shootin'!"

They didn't need Len to tell them to stay put. With Curt Wolfang's gunners creeping up, ringing them with blazing steel, it was already too late to make a break through their lines. All they could do was stay here, defend the canyon mouth as long as they could.

That wasn't very long. Curt Wolfang concentrated more and more fire pressure on them. Lead splayed against their rocky barrier, and sliced over the top of it with a continuous pelt and whine of death. Close-bunched as they were, the miners were able now for the first time to take stock of their losses. They were appalled to find their total number so far short of what it had been in the beginning.

Judging from the way Curt Wolfang pressed the fighting, he knew when he was holding aces. He must have known the story of Redskin's Folly, and was determined to repeat it. It was evident he knew the canyon was a blind one, and that if he could once blast the miners' hold on the canyon mouth and drive them deeper into the high-walled pocket, he could shoot them down almost at his leisure.

Loud above the battle thunder, the miners heard his command ring out: "Crowd 'em! They're trapped!"

The Black Coats charged, gunning all the way. The rocky outcrop was scant protection from the close-in lead pounding.

"Fall back!" Len Siringo gave the order. "It's our only chance."

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"It ain't no chance at all!" a dozen dismayed voices beat at him. "They'll shoot us down like dogs!"

If Len heard, he didn't answer. He himself was already moving back. They could hear his booming voice still ordering their retreat. They felt as though now they would be following him to slaughter.

The Black Coats came on, shouting and gunning, their muzzle flares sheeting the whole canyon with flame as they swept irresistibly on.

The miners were pushed back and back, past the half-way mark in the stubby, high-walled canyon; and still back, feeling for the dead end—and death. It was in the cards. They were going to die where a lot of Indians had died—and bitterly they blamed Len Siringo. He had been around here long enough to have known that Redskin's Folly was a box canyon.

Curt Wolfang would show no mercy. Twelve for one, he had made his bloody boast. "Twelve dead miners for every one of my Black Coats that fall to your guns!"

At that twelve to one rate, there weren't enough miners to go around.

They were sealed, signed, and delivered—each miner knew that. Then in a staggering second, something happened which was outside all their calculations. They weren't quite sure at first just what was going on in the darkness. But they could hear the cries of pain and baffled consternation sent up by the Black Coats.

Those gunners of Curt Wolfang's had been driving steadily ahead in the canyon, pushing the miners before them. Then all at once their blasting guns faltered, and their curses and yells echoed through the night.

While the miners hesitated, wondering, the soul-stirring voice of Len Siringo drove at them in soft insistent urging. "The west wall! Foller me along the west wall. Keep gunnin'. The battle's ours, if you act fast now!"

They followed him, with no doubt and no reluctance now. They plunged after him, hugging the west wall of the canyon, while their guns blazed into the howling darkness before them.

Some lead came snarling back at them, but not much. They pushed on, and miraculously, as they could tell from the locations of the few answering gun flashes, the Black Coats retreated. A few of the miners who skirted the canyon wall a little wide ran into cactus. That was strange, they thought, because it had been their impression that the tourists had cleaned every living piece of cactus from the canyon floor.

They had no time to wonder about it, because from ahead where the Black Coats were retreating, a new chorus of yells broke hideously on the night.

"Feed out, now boys," Len Siringo's low voice ordered, "all along this west canyon wall, and lace the darkness in front of you with lead."

Their guns made saffron flame all along the wall, and the muzzle thunder rocked the canyon. There was some answering fire at first—but that was only at first.

Curt Wolfang's Black Coat killers were pleading! They, who had ridden roughshod over the land. There was sardonic justice in that, the miners thought. Then Len Siringo's voice cut through.

"All right, boys; break it off!"

THEY stopped firing, but kept their fingers taut on triggers. Len pulled open the shutter of a bull's-eye lantern he had lit and placed on a shelf of rock while the battle was raging. He stepped quickly back in the shadows as the light streamed across the canyon floor.

"All right," Black Coats," he chopped, "single file, walk into the light with your guns on the ground and your hands grabbin' fer the top of the canyon."

They followed instructions. As man after man of them reeled into the light and stood there, hands high in abject

surrender, the miners of Cactus Bonanza gasped and stared. Every last one of the Black Coats and alley-rat tourists were scratched and bleeding and the clothes were half torn from their bodies.

"Can gun lead do all that?" Tennessee Tom asked incredulously.

The bull'seye showed up some bullet-riddled figures on the ground. Curt Wolfang's gimlet-eyed executioner, Hatchet Immler, was one. The weasel-eyed little gunner. Big-Mouth Gobble, who had printed the ultimatum in the *Cactus Bonanza Bugle,* was another.

But Curt Wolfang and his paunchy, fancy-vested right bower, Herb Horning, were among the living. At least they were standing up. Their clothes were in rags and blood clotted their faces and hands from a thousand scratches.

The shock of hair that hung down over Curt Wolfang's left eye didn't add to the fierceness of his expression now. The stringy hair. blood-matted, made him look like some old crone. He was actually rubbing his hands together and cowering.

And this, the miners one and all were thinking, was the man who was going to grab everything in sight and coordinate it for his own benefit! Curt Wolfang, the strong man, who had aimed to big-chief it over both Rainbow Creek and Cactus Bonanza, and go on from there, maybe planting his heels the whole West.

At a forward stir from Jacob Milford, Len Siringo admonished, "Easy, Jake. You'd like to gun now, like they done your boys. But that's their way, Jake, not ours. That's the jungle way. We'll see they get a fair trial, Jake. And because it's a fair trial—well, they'll be just as long dead as if you plugged 'em now."

The bull's-eye was showing up more than dead and alive gunmen. It revealed cactus. Cholla, prickley pear, barrel—every kind of cactus, heaped and scattered over the canyon floor.

"That cactus," Tennessee Tom observed, "It sure wasn't there when we come backin' up through the canyon with the Black Coats gunnin' us."

"No," Len agreed. "it wasn't there then." He smiled somberly. "You remember I said my cactus maybe wouldn't be wasted? Some of the boys you maybe grievin' about ain't dead. I posted 'em up on the canyon rim above here. They could look down and gauge the way the battle was progressin' by the gun flashes. After we got past, they dumped a lot of the cactus down.

"The Black Coats come rarin' along after us in the dark and run into it—like you already know now. When we turned around and blazed down on 'em in their confusion, they started backin' up—and run into some more of the cactus our boys had pitched down behind 'em. So there they was, surrounded by cactus fore and aft, and us ranged along the clear west wall, whangin' day-lights out of 'em with our guns."

Len's hand waved out. "And there they are now—what's left of 'em. And here we are. Cactus Bonanza's still a free town, and so will Rainbow Creek be as soon as they know it."

Tennessee Tom shook his head slowly. "All the time we was doubtin' you, Len, you had this trick up your sleeve. You didn't want to tell us, I reckon, on account you were afraid we might slack up some in our fightin' determination. But you led us in here a-purpose, didn't you, eh, Len?

"You even bellered around so's Wolfang's Black Coats could hear you and be sure to know where we were. You led 'em into this canyon trap. Only it was a trap fer them, not us. Yessir, Len, they shore is somethin' to this cactology stuff after all!"

Len grinned and felt for a stogy. "Want to buy some stock?" he grinned.

THE END

★ BLOOD BONDAGE

Novel of Cow-Country Loyalty

By John G. Pearsol

Why should those four hard-boiled honest cowmen mortgage their future and their lives to one ex-renegade who had told them, "Pay me off—or hang for murder?"

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Ghosts of the Dark Trails

A HAUNTED look sprang into young Rance Mutray's eyes as the five riders come swiftly across the flats toward his small ranch house at

of the DARK TRAILS

His gun blared before Rance could squeeze the trigger of his own weapon. . . .

the foot of the hills. With the red sinking sun behind them, they were like dancing black shapes against the yellow sand. The tall, wide-shouldered figure in the lead, Rance recognized, and that recognition brought to him an increasing sense of impending menace. The man was unmistakably Trig Masters.

It seemed queer that he would know Trig after all these seven years. But he did know him, and he knew why he and the others were riding to see him tonight. Without taking his eyes from those advancing figures Rance turned to his wife.

"Sue, take Johnny and go in the house. No matter what happens, don't come out till after these men leave."

Young, comely Sue Mutray frowned

as she stared at Rance. She started to speak, but he snapped, "Hurry it up, Sue!"

The woman took the six-year-old boy by the hand and hurried into the house, and the sound of the bar dropping into place across the door behind him was a comfort to him. He was conscious of the weight of the gun at his hip, and he was trying to recall how fast Trig Masters could pull a gun. Then the thought of that left him as he knew that one man could not whip five, no matter how fast he might be.

Trig Masters led the men into the yard. Stopping in front of Rance they spread in a fan-shaped formation, all of them staring. Masters' thin lips smiled without friendliness.

Trig said, "So I finally found you! But I wouldn't know you if it wasn't for that little scar on your cheek. Seven years changes a man."

Striving to put indifference in his voice, Rance asked, "What are you doing here, Trig?"

"I've been lookin' for you ever since you cheated me out of seventy-five thousand dollars. Now you can cough up!"

Rance said, while he shook his head, "I don't have it. I sent it back to the express company."

Trig's face did not change, but a wicked light danced in his green eyes. Without looking away from Rance he said, "Utah, you take this jasper's gun. He's a liar. We'll see if we can't loosen his tongue."

A lean, hook-nosed fellow climbed down from his saddle, approached Rance, the jingle of his big-rowelled spurs loud in the silence.

Then Trig Masters was talking insinuatingly, "Yu' see, Rance, I got th' edge on you. Nobody knows I was in on that bank robbery. But everybody knows you were. I'm honest and you're a crook. I can kill you and get away with it!"

A sound behind Rance made him go cold in his belly. A window in the house was sliding up, and Sue's voice said urgently, "This shotgun is filled with buckshot! All of you turn around and ride away."

Utah stopped, stood stock still. Trig Masters was a giant statue on his horse. Some of the other riders fidgeted, flicking nervous glances toward Masters.

Masters acknowledged, "It looks like you got th' drop, lady. We'll go."

He turned his horse, making it prance nervously by jabbing it in the sides with his spurs. As he spun it about his hand flashed down and up and his gun blared just before Rance could squeeze the trigger of his own weapon.

The bullet from Trig Masters' gun smashed Rance in the shoulder. Unfired, his gun dropped and he staggered back and hit the porch of the house while the shotgun muzzle peeping out of the window blared smoke and flame. But now the riders were moving fast and none of them fell with the shotgun's blast.

Trig Masters' pistol cracked and the glass tinkled in the window where Sue Mutray crouched with the scattergun in her hand.

"You better chuck that shotgun out here," Trig called, "Rance is shot. We'll kill him if you shoot again!"

Rance stumbled forward, trying to dive for the gun on the ground, but Utah, who had dismounted, jumped forward and clubbed his pistol and Rance sprawled out in the dust.

Sue tossed the gun outside, ran out to where Rance lay, and knelt beside him.

Trig Masters grinned at Utah, "Drag him inside. He ain't hurt bad. He's got a lot of talkin' to do."

Little Johnny, Rance's son, stared with wide eyes while Utah caught Rance by the shoulders. Resentfully, he shrilled, "Someday I'll . . ."

Sue said, *"Shhh,* Johnny!"

Following Utah inside, she bound up

Rance's wound while he was unconscious. When Rance opened his eyes, Trig laughed, "Well mister. Now where is it?"

Rance looked at his wife, at the kid, then at Masters. He said, "Gimme five minutes with th' missus alone, Trig, and I'll talk. She don't know anything about it. I have to tell her."

Trig nodded. "Five minutes," he agreed. Then he went out.

★

RANCE looked at his wife, misery in his eyes. "I guess I should have told you at first. But I thought it would never catch up with me. It was up state, in Toyah . . ."

There'd been five of them, he told her —himself, Bat Sanders, Jim Rebel, Lew Dolly and Luke Storm, all young fellows who'd worked for old Dan Tremper on the Bar O, they had brought a trail herd up from the south. But that first night in town Tremper rose from the poker table, and his hands were shaking as he grabbed for a whiskey bottle on the bar.

Luke Storm reached out and took the bottle away. "Before you git too drunk to write a check, how about our salary?" he'd asked Tremper. "Or *can* you write a check? Did you lose your shirt?"

Dan Tremper shook his head, reached again for the bottle. "I lost every nickle I had on earth. I even lost th' ranch and cattle. You'll have to wait for your money."

Luke Storm cursed. He slapped the whiskey bottle down in front of Tremper. "Okay! Drink yourself to death! You'll never be missed, either here or back home!"

Rance Mutray in the lead, they scuffed outside.

A big fellow followed them. He stopped and said, "I heard you in there. Tough luck. But it don't need to get you down. I'm in tough luck too, but I got enough for a few drinks before I put a proposition up to you."

They took the drinks. The proposition was to help Trig Masters rob a bank. With the whiskey in them it didn't sound so bad. And bitter at the rotten deal Dan Tremper had handed them, they hitched their horses in front of the Toyah State Bank and waited.

Trig Masters and the others went inside. Rance Mutray stayed with the horses.

As he stood there, tensely watchful, a fellow came out of the saloon and down toward him. It was Jake Howell, an acquaintance of Rance's. Howell stopped and said, "Hiah, Rance? How come you're up here in this part of th' country?"

Rance said, "I'm—"

Just then a shot sounded in the bank. Luke Storm, Bat Sanders and Trig Masters, came bounding out the door, guns in their hands. Jake Howell yelled, "Bank robbery, by God! I—"

It was then that Rance hit him hard on the jaw. Trig Masters tossed the money sack to Rance and they leaped on their horses. Bullets began to fly down the street, and they beat a posse across the flats, climbed into the hills. But they were cornered.

Afoot, Trig Masters took a scout into the hills to spot the posse. When he came back he said: "I've found a way out. Hide th' money here. Then go, one at a time, between them two peaks. We can come back after th' money."

They hid the money sack. Stealing along in the darkness, they came to the valley between the two peaks. Rance Mutray scouted ahead. He saw a posse waiting for them. He looked for Trig Masters and Trig was gone. He back-trailed and saw a posse closing in behind them. But they could beat it, if. . . .

He said, "That fellow I hit on th' jaw

back there in town knows me. So I'm marked. They'll have my name and description all over the country. Trig has skipped. He used us, then tried to have us trapped. He thinks he's got th' money in that sack, but all he's got is an old shirt with a few .45 cartridges to give it weight. I got th' money! And I got it for a damn' good reason."

He patted his shirt. "When th' whiskey wore off a little I knew I didn't want any part of this. I reckoned you fellas didn't either. Ride hard and you can get away. I'll try to keep th' posse busy till you're gone. Then I'll give up th' money and take my medicine. I'd rather have it that way. I don't want to keep running from th' law all my life."

They argued, but he wouldn't listen. He watched them ride away. He cut across country and fired a gun to draw the posse after him. But he didn't give himself up. He didn't like the idea of prison any better than the next man.

He told himself that if he got the money back that would be enough. Then a bullet found him as he raced along. He grew weak, grabbed at the saddle-horn to keep from falling.

Finally, losing the posse, he rested in the hills till his wound healed. He sent the money to the express company, came down near the Border. He met a girl named Sue and married her.

And now. . . .

"Now, I'm in a spot, and you're in a spot," Rance concluded. "Trig Masters won't believe me when I say I sent th' money back. He'll either get it or start shooting. I have to stall him, some way. I'm sorry for your sake, Sue. I thought I had it all figured out, old girl."

She leaned over him and touched his lips. She whispered, "For seven years we've been happy. Anything we pay for it could not be too big a price!"

He kissed her then, and went out into the other room.

CHAPTER TWO

Death's Rendezvous

A COLD, slashing downpour hammered hard at the board sides of the long, rambling Bar O ranch house. It was Dan Tremper's old ranch, but now Luke Storm owned it.

On days like this, when the weather kept the men inside, Luke Storm always thought of Rance Mutray, wondered where he was and how he was doing.

He had never learned.

Up to this spring, Luke had done well, with Lew Dolly, Jim Rebel and Bat Sanders working for him. But now he was about broke, his back to the wall. His only out would be a show-down fight with Roman Kerr, the range-hog who had fenced him in.

Above the harsh thunder of the rain, Luke Storm paced back and forth, his boot heels clumping on the bare living room floor. He was conscious of Bat Sanders and Lew Dolly watching him. He wanted to say something, but he hated to say it. He wanted to fight, but he hated to ask any one to fight for him.

Then Lew Dolly said, "Th' way I look at it is this: I reckon I know why you haven't been throwin' lead at Kerr. It's because one of us might be killed."

Luke stopped, stared at Lew, then at Bat. He said, "Hell, that ain't th' reason."

"You're a liar!" Bat Sanders grinned. "I know it. You know it. We all know it. So me and Lew and Jim have decided to declare war on our own. If we start it, then mebby you won't feel so bad, just in case one of us happens to get beefed."

Storm looked out the window, at the rain-drenched yard. He said, his tone belying his words, "Huh! Why would I weep if one of you stopped a bullet! You were all born to be hung!"

Lew grinned at Bat Sanders. "He's beginnin' to sound natural again!"

The door opened and Jim Rebel, his black slicker glistening, water dripping from the broad brim of his black hat, stomped into the room. He threw a package of letters onto the table and looked at his pardners.

He said, "In town, Roman Kerr told me to tell you he'd either give you five thousand dollars or a war, which ever you wanted. He said one of you had to leave the country."

Luke Storm picked up the letters, tied with a string.

While he opened the bundle, Jim Rebel said, "I told him we'd been waitin' for him to get up his nerve for a long time. Good thing, I told him, he'd raked up enough whiskey guts to speak his piece. I said to him, 'We'll be right over and accommodate you, you mangy son of a coyote!' "

Jim Rebel winked at Lew Dolly and Bat Sanders. With hypocritical concern in his voice, he went on, "So, Luke, I reckon I got us into a fight. I'm sorry."

Luke, reading a letter, shook his head. He said, "We got a letter from Rance. We each got one. You better read 'em."

They all opened envelopes that Luke handed them. They read, and all letters were the same:

I'm in a jam. Trig Masters has showed up. He wants the seventy-five thousand that we skipped with and split among ourselves. It just happens that I don't have my share.

I got married and we have a boy. I bought a little place, but business hasn't been so good and I'm busted. I guess you fellows will have to cough up.

If you dont', I'll have to put the pressure on and tell that you happened to be in on a bank robbery up-state.

Ship me the money, Wells-Fargo, addressed to Bill Bolton, Piasano, Texas.

Rance Mutray.

Jim Rebel ejaculated, "Well, I'll be damned! Th' dirty—"

He stopped suddenly and stared at Luke Storm. Luke was smiling, looking from one to another.

Luke said, "Get it? Trig Masters caught up with Rance and *made* him write these letters. Rance knew it wouldn't do any good to try to make Trig believe he sent the money back, because Trig don't do things that way. He wouldn't believe anybody else would do it. So Rance deliberately put that in there about us splittin' th' seventy-five thousand so we'd know he was in a spot. He needs us."

The rain hammered hard against the sides of the house. Jim Rebel said again, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Luke said, "So our war with Roman Kerr is off. I'll sell out to him and take

what I can get. Rance might need a lift after this is over. We'll head for Piasano right away."

Bat Sanders said, "I'll saddle th' horses!"

He went out, and Lew Dolly mused, "You know, o' course, that once you leave here you can't come back, no matter whether you sell to Kerr or not. If you leave and don't sell he'll grab it and keep it. If you do sell you'll be th' laughin' stock of th' range. Me, I don't have anything to lose, but—"

"I don't have anything to lose either," Luke Storm argued. "If it hadn't been for Rance I probably wouldn't be here. Help Bat with th' horses. We'll stop by Kerr's place on th' way out!"

★

THEY splashed through the mud and the rain up over the hills toward Kerr's place. In the ranch yard, Luke stepped down out of his saddle.

He said, "I'll be out in a minute."

He wasn't long. When he came out he said, "I got five thousand. Cash."

Jim Rebel said skeptically, "We better ride fast to keep it. He'll probably try to drygulch us to get it back."

As he spoke a rifle clattered from a window of the house. Jim Rebel gave a soft moan and fell forward on his horse's neck, clutching tight on the animal's mane to keep from falling out of the saddle. His horse danced nervously about and Bat Sanders rode up beside him and steadied him.

The rifle spoke again and Lew Dolly cursed sharply. More guns opened up. Luke Storm was shooting fast with his pistol as he followed Lew and Jim and Bat. Bat fired back toward the house as he rode sidewise in his saddle till they cut around the base of a hill and were out of range.

Luke watched Jim Rebel, frowning, concern in his black eyes as he saw Jim's fingers tighten convulsively in the long hair of his horse's mane.

"How bad is it, Jim?" he shouted as they raced along.

"A scratch," Jim called back.

Luke smiled. He kept close to Jim and Lew, and when they guided the fastness of the hills Lukes called a halt. He climbed down and was just in time to catch Jim Rebel in his arms as he crumpled out of the saddle, limp as an empty sack.

Laying Jim on the ground, Luke examined his wound. "Loss of blood mostly," he announced. "Lew, you stay with him till he gets better. Then hit for Piasano."

He looked up and searched Bat Sanders' face. He asked anxiously, "Did you get hit too?"

Bat shook his head. He said, "Me? No, I'm okay."

Luke frowned. It was getting dark and it was hard to see, and Bat's face looked strained and white.

Luke directed, "Okay. Then we'll travel."

Luke and Bat pounded away in the night, riding hard and fast till the gray fingers of dawn streaked the eastern sky. Then Bat Sanders slumped forward just as Jim Rebel had done, his hands clinging desperately to his horse's mane.

Weakly, Bat whispered, "I tried—to make th' grade, Luke. But I. . . ."

Dragging Bat to a grassy spot at the trail-side, Luke bared a hole in his side and cursed under his breath while he swallowed a lump in his throat. Bat and Jim, shot all to hell, but trying to make the grade for Rance. . . !

"You—you crazy, glorious damn' fool!" Luke Storm whispered.

He sat there beside Bat Sanders till Bat opened his eyes. Bat grinned sheepishly. He said weakly. "Gettin' soft, I reckon, lettin' a scratch like this knock me out. Now you go on, Luke. I'm okay,

see? I'll be along in a little while."

Luke shook his head. Bat's lips tightened. He said, suggestively, "You wouldn't want me to git up and climb into a saddle, would you?"

Luke stated flatly, "You won't climb into no saddle."

Bat grinned. "Th' hell I won't! Somebody goes to Rance Mutray. You or me. Which?"

Luke rose. "I'll go. If you feel yourself slippin', manage to get yourself tied to your horse some way, and he'll get you some where."

Still grinning, Bat said, "Run along. I'll be with you in a day or two."

Luke put a smile on his big-boned face. He said, "Okay. I'll be seein' you."

Then he swung into the saddle and rode away. He didn't look back. He didn't expect to ever see either Bat Sanders or Jim Rebel again. He expected Lew Dolly would come into Piasano in a day or so with news that two new graves were up there in the hills.

But there was Rance Mutray, the unselfish, smooth-tongued jasper who had persuaded a bunch of half drunk youngsters to ride to safety while he put a posse on his own trail. Rance Mutray would have done what Jim Rebel and Bat Sanders were doing, what Luke Storm was doing.

Down under a blazing sun, then into the shadows of evening, Luke Storm rode, stopping when the dark, blurry outlines of a town that sprawled along the edge of the Rio Grande showed below him.

Slowly, he rode into town. a dust-covered, hunched-over giant, with fatigue riding heavily on his broad shoulders. At the saloon he stopped, went inside, to see a crowded, smoke-filled room, where double-gunned men eyed him distrustfully.

While he waited for a drink, Luke asked of the barkeep, "You happen to know a fella named Rance Mutray around here?"

THE barkeep put a bottle and glass in front of Luke. He shook his head. "Never heard of 'im."

A thin-faced fellow beside Luke glanced at him, then moved away. Luke took his drink, set his glass down. His eyes came to rest on a sign painted on the mirror that read, "Trig Masters' Dobe Dollar Bar. A Square Deal For All."

Abruptly, Luke knew that he'd made a mistake, standing in Trig Masters' saloon, asking for Rance Mutray. He turned, and the fellow who had been beside him was behind him now, staring at him, standing beside a big gent whom Luke recognized as Trig Masters.

Trig stared, frowning at Luke. Luke, hoping that seven years had changed him enough, nodded, said, "Howdy, gents. Have a drink?"

Trig nodded to the barkeep. He kept the frown on his brow as he stepped to the bar. He asked, "Ain't I seen you some place before?"

Luke grinned and acknowledged. "I been lots of places. But right now I'm lookin' for a fellow—Rance Mutray. Robbed a bank up-state. I'm a deputy. Heard he was down here. Know him?"

Trig made damp circles on the bar-top with his glass. "No," he denied, "I never heard of him. Thanks for th' drink."

Luke said, "Don't mention it, mister," as Trig moved away, the lean-faced gent with him.

When they'd gone through a door at the end of the room Luke went out. Up the street, he stopped at the sheriff's office. Of the lawman he inquired, "Ever hear of a fellow named Rance Mutray having a ranch around here?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Not around here," he said. "Not in this country, an' I don't reckon close to it. I know everybody within a hundred miles o' here."

Luke thanked him and went out. Down near the saloon door the thin-faced fellow

was standing. He started up the street when Luke started down, his eyes staying on Luke, his face stony, a tense restraint in his stride that made Luke conscious of the gun at his hip.

As Luke moved slowly along, pretending not to notice the lean-faced jasper's approach, his mind worked fast.

Trig Masters, he figured, had managed to get hold of some crooked money, had set himself up in business. He'd learned where Rance Mutray was, had probably forced him to come here with him. Trig knew that five men would not want to go to jail for bank robbery just so they could implicate Trig Masters along with them.

They'd either cough up or fight. And in a fight Trig had the upper hand. He had his gunmen. He had Rance Mutray as a hole card. Rance had mentioned that he'd gotten married and they had a boy, and Trig had them as a hole card to make Rance talk turkey.

The hatchet-faced killer was close to Luke now. In the darkness that was shot with yellow squares of light spearing from unshaded windows, Luke could see his cold eyes more plainly. His hands hung close to the double guns at his hips. He swerved, bumped into Luke, then cursed and leaped away quickly, his hands streaking for his guns.

He was fast; fast as a streak of greased lightning. His guns were out and swinging up before Luke could get his own clear of leather. But Luke threw himself sidewise and down, a bullet singing over his head as he fell on his face. Then his gun rose, blared raucously. The gunman staggered back. He fell, lay still.

A crowd surged up and gathered around Luke. A gent wearing a sheriff's badge poked stiff fingers into Luke's chest and asked, "Now just what's all this about, mister? You blow in here and have a gun-fight. You know this fella, you just shot?"

Luke shook his head. Somebody back in the crowd said, "He drawed first on Utah. He bumped into him, then tried to kill him."

Somebody else said, "That's right. I saw it too."

The sheriff said, "Come on, you," to Luke. He reached out to take Luke's arm.

But a girl's voice, rising above the babble, broke in sharply. "That is not true. Theese Utah, she bomp into theese other man. Theese Utah, she try to shoot first. That is *verdad,* because I see it *tambien!*"

Luke swiveled his head about. The girl was Spanish, white-skinned, black-eyed, with a wealth of raven hair piled atop her head. She was pretty as a picture. Her eyes were flashing. She stomped a ridiculously high-heeled foot to add emphasis to her words.

The sheriff frowned. "Now Rosita, you sure?"

Rosita stamped her foot again. "Am I sure?" she inquired icily. "*Seguro!* Do you believe that a daughter of Don Miguel De Rossa, the don of—"

"No!" the sheriff shook his head. "I don't believe the daughter of Don Miguel would lie. If you say it's so, then it's so. Them other fellas, they was mistaken."

Rosita smiled graciously at the sheriff, then at Luke. She said, "Bueno," then moved down the street.

The sheriff said to Luke, "Mister, you're lucky. That gal's got more money than th' U. S. Treasury. Her an' her brothers, they own—"

"That makes it so she can't tell a lie, I suppose!" somebody interrupted from the crowd.

"That makes it," the sheriff admitted, "so it don't pay to call her a liar. She could buy this county and throw it away, and never miss th' money."

The crowd dispersed. Luke faced Trig Masters, who had come up. Luke laughed and said, "You know what I think, mister? I think this Utah fella you had working for you was crooked. He got ideas

when I said I was after this Rance Mutray bank-robber. He wanted the reward for himself. He knows where he is, which means he's around here. I think I'll stick around!"

Trig Masters said nothing, turned, stomped down the street. Luke watched the girl, Rosita, turn in at the door of a big white house at the farther end of the street.

He smiled and went into the hotel and got himself a room and washed and shaved and put on a clean shirt.

LATER, out on the street again, Luke found it deserted. Keeping to the shadows, he moved on down toward the main part of town. Behind him, he could see three dark shapes following him.

Toward a shack at the far end of town where a light burned in a window, Luke made his way. A sign over the door of the shack read, "Perdido Stage Lines. Western Union Telegrams." Luke slipped quickly inside and stepped away from the door.

A sleepy-eyed individual raised his head from a desk and said, "Howdy."

Luke took a telegram blank from the desk and wrote,

Bill Jones,
Terlingua, Texas.
I know where they're keeping Rance. I'll get him tonight and start back. Meet me.

Luke.

He paid for the wire and slipped outside. Lost in the darkness he watched while three shadows came close to the station. One of them went inside. When he came out they all hurried away and Luke followed them. They went down to the saloon and Luke cut down an alley and stopped at a window in the rear of the building.

He heard Trig Masters say, "Okay, if he wants to get him tonight, accommodate him. You three go down there and stay with Silver. When Luke shows up, kill him. We'll have a story to square it with th' sheriff."

Luke went around to the front again, waited in the darkness at the building corner. The three men came out and went down the street and into a shack not far from the big white house where Rosita had entered.

They didn't come out, and Luke stole around the house, peered in through a crack at the bottom of the drawn blind and saw Rance Mutray laying on a cot. Rance's face was white, drawn. He looked bad.

Luke cursed softly, went back up to the hotel, sat on the porch trying to figure how to get Rance out of the shack before Trig Masters would discover that he'd been fooled; that a telegram sent to Bill Jones in Terlingua was a fake.

NO FINER DRINK FROM POLE TO POLE
BETTER TASTE...
PEPSI-COLA
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.
...BIGGER DRINK
Purity...in the big big bottle — that's Pepsi-Cola!

The soft plop of horse's hoofs made Luke look up. A horseman rode into town, slowly, looking about curiously as he came near the hotel. Luke rose, called, "Lew!" softly.

Lew Dolly stopped, dismounted. On the porch he grinned. Luke asked hesitantly, "Jim and Bat? They—they died, Lew?"

Lew laughed, "Hell, you can't kill 'em! They're comin' right behind me, one at a time. We reckoned we better not come in all together. Decided we better not know each other. Where's Rance?"

Luke told him, about Trig, about the attempt on his life, about the fake telegram to Bill Jones that had let him know where Rance was located.

Lew cursed. He said, "Okay. We'll go get him and shoot hell out of—"

"It won't work," Luke told him. "There's at least four men there. They're watching for a play tonight. Rance is either sick or wounded. He looked bad. We have to fix it so we can take him away. We can't do it with a fight like that. There's a sheriff here. He's dumb, but he's honest, and he'd hold us all and find out that Rance was wanted for bank robbery. We have to do it cagey."

There on the porch, Luke and Lew waited. It was dawn when Jim Rebel came riding into town. He rode up straight and stiff in his saddle. His face was white. His lips were set, grim. He looked at Luke and winked and cut his horse in around the corner of the hotel.

In a minute Bat Sanders came along, looking about like Jim, as though grit and guts alone were holding him in the saddle. He went back the way he'd seen Jim turn his horse.

"Them two," Lew Dolly said huskily, as though he had a frog in his throat, "They've got enough lead in 'em to down any man on earth. But you couldn't drag 'em out of their saddles with a twenty mule team!"

Luke said, "You go talk to 'em. Tell 'em to keep their eyes on me. I gotta hunch we can slip Rance over to that big white house across th' street from where he is. When I give th' sign we'll do it. An' mebby we better not know each other. Nobody's seen you here with me. What Trig Masters don't know sure won't hurt him."

CHAPTER THREE

Once a Pardner—

LUKE went down and tapped on the door of the big white house. Rosita came to the door and Luke took off his hat. He said, "I want to thank you for telling what you saw up there last night. That saved me a heap of trouble."

Rosita's eyes searched Luke's face. They twinkled a little. She said, "You look much better with thee wheeskers off your face."

Luke said, "Yeah," and rubbed a hand over a square jaw that was beginning to stubble again.

"Those theengs I tell thee sheriffee," Rosita said, "were the truth. That is all."

Luke said, "Sure. That's what I want to thank you for. But there's something else."

Rosita raised one eyebrow while skepticism came into her black eyes.

Luke said, "There's a fellow here. He's sick. This Trig Masters has him locked up, trying to make him cough up a lot of money. Trig can prove that this pal of mine is a bank robber, but he didn't really rob a bank, because he sent the money back. See?"

Rosita nodded, but she didn't look as though she saw.

Luke went on, "I want to take this friend of mine away from Trig Masters and hide him somewhere till it's safe to get him away. I thought mebby we could slip him over here after dark and you

could put him to bed till we got ready to take him away. I'd pay you well for it. There's nobody else I can ask to do it. Most everybody here except you is either a crook or they'd sell me and my friend out for a few dollars."

Rosita asked, "And me, I will not sell you out?"

Luke said, "No, I don't reckon you would."

"Then you breeng him here to me," Rosita told him, "tonight when it is dark. I will have everything ready then."

"I'm sure grateful to you, ma'am," Luke told her.

Rosita said nothing, but she smiled and Luke hurried away. Up at the saloon, he went in and Lew Dolly was at the bar.

Jim Rebel was in a chair against the wall on one side of the room, Bat Sanders across from him. None of them spoke to Luke. Luke eased up beside Lew and ordered a drink and when the barkeep turned to get it, Luke spoke to Lew.

He whispered, "I got it fixed. I'll pick a fight with a couple of Trig's men tonight, th' ones he keeps down there guarding Rance. When I start th' trouble you get Rance and take him into that big house."

Lew nodded. The barkeep put a drink in front of Luke. Finished with it, Luke went up and sat on the hotel porch most all the day. When the sun sank and the shadows fell across the street, he watched for the three men Trig had sent down to help guard Rance. By the way Trig had spoken, Luke knew that only one other man was there, a gent named Silver.

During the evening Luke saw the three, and he went down the street and into the saloon in their wake. Lew and Jim and Bat were still there. Luke winked at Lew and jerked his head toward the door.

In a minute Lew went out, then Bat and Jim. Luke went to the door and waited till the three gents he was watching started out.

Luke stepped outside ahead of them and when they came out he stepped up and pushed the flat of his hand against the chest of the tallest one. He was a fellow with a funny cast in his right eye, to make it seem blinded.

Luke brayed loudly, "You're th' son that said last night that I picked that fight with Utah, ain't you?"

A crowd was gathering. Down the street, in the darkness, Luke couldn't see the shack where Rance was lying on a cot, wounded or sick.

The blind-eyed fellow sneered, "Sure, I said that. What of it?"

Luke hit him, quick and hard. He knocked him back against the 'dobe wall of the saloon, the tingle of the blow running up into Luke's shoulder.

"That's what of it, brother!" Luke snapped.

But blind-eye didn't hear him. He was out cold. Somebody laughed in the crowd and one of the others who was with the blind-eyed gent stepped back, his hand sweeping toward his gun. But Luke jumped for him and hit him in the mouth and knocked him off balance before he could get his gun out.

Just then a shot sounded down the street. The only one of the three gunmen still on his feet started to run toward the sound, but Luke tripped him and he sprawled on his face. Then the crowd swept out of the saloon, trouped down toward where the gun had been fired.

Smiling, Luke followed. Trig Masters came running along with a couple gunmen at his heels to peer anxiously into the shack where Rance Mutray had lain. The shack was empty, and Masters cursed.

The sheriff, panting as he came up, asked Luke, "What's all this about? More fightin' mister? I warn you, we won't stand for it!"

Luke shrugged, retorted, "Don't ask me about it. That bunch working for Masters won't take a lady's word for it

that I didn't start trouble with Utah. They heard her say what happened. But they still say I picked th' fight. I had to call 'em liars. I had to sock one of 'em in th' puss."

"Well, be careful about your sockin'," the sheriff warned.

"Sure," agreed Luke amiably, "As long as they're careful how they talk, it'll work out fine."

Somebody moaned and picked himself up out of the dirt near the house in the darkness. He moaned again, held his hands to his head, staggered over to where Trig Masters stood.

A voice in the crowd said. "That's Silver. He's been hurt."

To Trig Masters, Silver complained, "They got him. I heard a noise at th' door. I went to it. When I went outside I looked back in and somebody was hoistin' him out of th' window. I took a shot at him, then somethin' hit me on th' head. I. . . ."

The expression on Trig's face made Silver stop. He stared at the sheriff who came close to him, inquiring, "What's this about somebody gettin' somebody else, Silver?"

Silver pressed his hands to his temples, shook his head. Trig Masters said contemptuously, "He's woozy from a bat on th' head. He don't know what he's talkin' about!"

The sheriff frowned. Trig led Silver up the street. As though with one accord, everybody headed toward the saloon and Luke went along.

★

BAT and Jim and Lew were there; Bat and Jim in their chairs, Lew at the bar. Silver, the white-haired gunman who had been hit on the head, stared at Lew and cursed and yelled, "That's him! That's th' gent that crawled in th' window!"

Lew turned and stared coldly at Silver. Bat and Jim both rose from their chairs. Luke stepped around so he'd be in the clear. The sheriff complained, "There it goes again! What th' hell is all this about, Silver?"

Silver gruffed, "That gent there," he pointed at Lew. "I was in that house down there. A fella was with me, a fella that said a bunch of gents were gonna kill him. He was scared and I let him bunk with me. But it looks like they got him. That gent there at th' bar took him out th' window."

From over at the wall, Jim Rebel spoke up, "You're wrong, mister. That fella at th' bar wasn't down that way. He was up at th' other end of town. I saw him. He didn't even go down that way when th' gun went off."

From his place across the room, Bat Sanders chimed in, "I saw him too. Th' white-haired jasper is crazy."

Silver, hate in his eyes, asked Bat coldly, "Are you callin' me a liar, fella?"

Bat nodded. "Just that. A damn' liar!"

Silver stiffened. Trig Masters whispered something to him and he nodded.

The sheriff said, "This is a hell of a mix-up. If you want to swear out a warrant for that fellow there at th' bar, I'll serve it. But you'll have to have more proof than your word, Silver."

Silver said, "Let it slide."

The sheriff shrugged. He glared at Bat and Lew and Jim, and looked none too friendly at Luke as he went out. Lew grinned insolently at Trig Masters, then went to the door and outside.

Jim and Bat followed him. Luke went out after them. They were down the street waiting for him.

"Bat clouted that white-headed hombre on th' head with a pistol-barrel," Lew informed Luke. "He was just ready to take a shot at me while I was hoisting Rance out of th' window. He's over at that gal's house."

Wordlessly, they went on and Rosita opened the door, led them to where Rance lay. He stared at them and didn't speak for a long time. Finally he said very huskily, "It's—it's great to see you bunch of horse thieves!"

He tried to make it sound jocular, but his voice shook and he turned his face to the wall right away so they wouldn't see the mistiness in his eyes.

"That letter," he went on, "I had to write it that way. Trig made me give him a bill of sale to my ranch. Then he brought us down here. He kept sayin' he'd do things to th' kid and th' missus if I didn't play ball, so I had to play for time. That's why th' letter sounded like that. You know. . . ."

Luke said softly, "Sure. We knew. We didn't give it a thought."

Still looking at the wall, Rance husked, "Trig still has th' missus and th' kid in a room up over th' saloon. He couldn't get me up there very handy, because I couldn't walk. He can make it plenty miserable for them."

Jim Rebel stated softly, "Trig's all through making things miserable for anybody, Rance."

Of Rosita, Luke asked, "You reckon we could buy a covered wagon and a good team and have it back here later on tonight?"

Rosita nodded. "*Si,*" she said. "That can be done."

Bat leaned down and patted Rance on the shoulder. He said, "Be ready to take a ride pretty pronto, old timer."

Rance said huskily, "You fellas—you're pretty swell. I. . . ."

Bat laughed. "We ain't got nothin' else to do," he assured Rance.

Then they were gone, and Rosita kept staring at the door. An old Mexican woman pulled some covers up over Rance, and Rosita looked at her. In Spanish she said, "Theese men—the feeling they hold for one another—it awes me. Their faces turn from ice and stone to something soft and warm and comforting when they look at this sick one on the bed. . . ."

"That," croaked the old one, "That is true friendship. But that is something denied to one who has wealth."

"All my wealth and all my jewels," Rosita breathed wistfully, "I would give gladly for just one look as they bequeathed him."

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Stand!

BACK up to the saloon, Luke and Bat and the others walked slowly. The saloon was still crowded when they entered, deploying so Jim and Bat could find chairs to rest. Luke and Lew stayed at the bar.

Silver, the white-haired gunman, put a crooked sort of smile on his thin lips as he watched them all. The fellow Luke had knocked out, outside the saloon, glared. Several others watched them. But Luke didn't want to start anything until the room cleared of most everybody not connected with Trig Masters. He wanted to find out who he had to fight, how many there would be.

Gradually the room cleared, until there

If you cotton to the hard-hitting writing style of this story, you'll want to read more by the same author. Another swift novelette by John G. Pearsol, a roaring epic of back-to-the-wall cowmen, appears in February BIG-BOOK WESTERN. Get a copy today—and read "Boothill's Honkatonk Hostage!"

were only six men and Trig Masters left. Those six and Trig kept their eyes on Bat and Lew and Luke and Jim. Luke moved away from the bar and started to climb the stairs at the rear of the room.

His voice filled with menace, Trig Masters called, "Just a minute, brother!"

But Luke didn't stop. Leaping forward, he took the steps three at a time while Trig Masters yelled. A gun exploded down in the barroom as Luke hit the top of the stairs and raced down a hallway.

Slapping open all the doors as he ran along, he found one locked and he crashed his weight against it, smashing the lock. A woman was there, tied, gagged, when Luke smashed his way inside. A kid of about six was with her.

The guns down below in the saloon were raising hell now. Luke told the woman, "Rance sent me!" as he jumped forward and ripped the gag out of her mouth.

"I'm Luke Storm," he went on hurriedly as he untied the ropes that bound her. "Rance is okay. Go to the big white house at the end of the street. Rance is there."

Luke helped her to the hallway, dragging the boy with her.

Then a yell came from the end of the hallway that led down into the saloon. Silver, twin guns in his hands, leaped into the hall. His guns swung up.

Luke Storm fell sidewise and his gun blasted as Silver was slid to a halt. With the boom of the pistol Silver stiffened, fell backward. Luke could hear his guns and his boots clattering above the gunfire as he rolled down the stairs.

The saloon was a bedlam now. The guns clattered and roared. Trig Masters' fog-horn voice was yelling.

Luke ran to the head of the stairway and began to slam shots down at the men barricaded in the room below him. Six of them against three. Bat Sanders, Lew Dolly and Jim Rebel were barricaded behind overturned tables. Trig and his gun-toters were barricaded behind the bar, and in a doorway that lead to another room at the back of the barroom.

Luke's shots drove Trig's gun-toters from cover. They had to come out and fight or stay there and die. Some of them charged the overturned tables behind which Lew and Bat and Jim crouched. Some of them stepped out from behind the bar and shot at Luke.

A bullet found Luke Storm's left shoulder. His arm hung limp and useless as he stepped carefully down the stairs, his gun flaming.

Trig Masters, trying hard to raise a pair of guns in hands which suddenly seemed to grow too weak to hold them, wilted down behind the bar. He didn't rise.

Up from behind their barricades, Lew and Bat and Jim rose and poured lead at the men who charged them.

Then it was very quiet. Luke Storm stood at the bottom of the stairs staring at Lew and Bat and Jim. Jim Rebel, his face white as death, had a bloody scratch across his pallid cheek. Bat Sanders, wounded also, slowly holstered his gun and looked at the others. Lew Dolly, his voice a little shaky, spoke as though to himself, in a whispering, husky voice.

He said, "I guess that evens things up a little, Rance, old fella."

OUTSIDE in the night there was the pound of boots and the hoarse, inquiring yells of men. Luke Storm ordered, "Out th' back way."

They slipped down the hallway and out into the night. Cutting up and across the street in the darkness, they came to the big white house.

Mexicans were loading Rance Mutray into a covered wagon. Sue Mutray, hovering over him, was tucking covers about him. When Luke and the others came by she breathed, "Thank God!"

Then the wagon rumbled away and Luke and Bat and Jim and Lew slipped up onto their horses. Grinning, Luke Storm thrust out his hand to Rosita.

"You're a hell of a good fellow," he blurted, "If you know what I mean!"

Rosita's eyes were very bright as she smiled and said softly, "I—I do know what you mean."

They were gone, and Rosita stood there staring after them. From up the street the sounds of the bewildered men who had gone into the saloon to look at the carnage there came to her. The sheriff came down the street.

"Listen, Rosita," he said sternly, "Somebody told me he saw them four fellas come over here, th' four that have been messin' around Trig Masters' place. There's been a big fight and a lot of men killed. If you've got 'em hid out, you better tell me where they are. I want to talk to them jaspers!"

That peculiar smile still on her lips, Rosita shook her head. She denied, "I have not seen them. Only did I hear the sound of much shooting and I saw, very dimly in the shadows, some men going that way," she pointed in the opposite direction from that taken by the wagon and Luke Storm. "But I do not think they were the men you talk of."

The skepticism in the sheriff's eyes made her straighten up. She drew herself up proudly. "You do not believe me, Sheriffee?" she asked. "Do you think that the daughter of. . . ."

The sheriff shook his head. He said, "No, Rosita, I don't think a daughter of Don Miguel would lie."

He moved away, shaking his head. The old Mexican woman came out of the house.

Rosita, her eyes still shining and watching the darkness into which Luke Storm had vanished, whispered, "I have see it! For me, it was! That warm light that came into their eyes when they looked at the wounded one. He said to me, 'You are one hell of a good fellow.' And I knew what he meant!"

The old hag snorted. . . .

UP IN the hills a covered wagon stopped. Luke Storm and Bat and the others grinned as they looked in at Rance Mutray. Luke handed Rance the five thousand dollars he'd raised when he sold his ranch.

"That," he said, "is a little loan. I brought it along thinkin' mebby you'd need it. Pay it back some day when you git rich, but no hurry. I got plenty. There's more where that come from. We're all fixed up nice, Bat and Jim and Lew and me. We got nice payin' ranches, and if it wasn't for that old bank robbery charge we'd take you there. But. . . .

He stopped, for Sue Mutray was crying, but they were tears of happiness. Rance's eyes were strangely bright.

Luke waved a hand at the Mexican who drove the team and said, "Go ahead. Head east. There's some nice country over there. I don't suppose there's a chance of getting your ranch back. If Trig didn't sell it, with him dead it'll go to his heirs or to th' state. We'll look you up some time, Rance."

The wagon rumbled on. Luke and the others sat there, watching its vague outlines vanish in the darkness. When the rumble of the wagon wheels had quieted, Luke sighed.

"We can mebby git a job over in th' Terlinguas. There's some nice spreads over that way. Or we could go back to that Pisasno town. That Rosita gal, she mebbe has some ranches scattered around.

Bat and Lew and Jim grinned. Bat said, "With Trig Masters gone that should be nice country back there."

And they picked up their reins and started back. . . .

THE END

★ ★ HOSS GREER —

Great Range-War Novel

By Harry F. Olmsted

It's sure-fire bad luck to ride a dead man's horse, according to cow-country superstition. But when Old Hoss found himself caught between the fires of that deadly range-feud, he learned that it may be even worse luck to ride the horse of a live renegade!

CHAPTER ONE

Alias Six Pistol Shride

OLD HOSS GREER had converted a lot of strong feelings regarding horses into sayings, down the years. Like the horse being God's noblest critter. Or, conversely, the horse being the Devil's o'neriest brute. But, all in all, his love for horses was profound and he was forever acquiring animals for sentimental reasons, some of which gained him the name of being a poor picker, many of which plunged him squarely into trouble.

The zebra dun he picked up at the sheriff's auction in Gila City is an example.

Hoss rode down to Gila City to consummate a cattle deal, overcame a robust sales resistance, dictated the price, and adroitly turned the conditions into channels lucrative to himself. The gods were kind; the stars were favorable; his hunch was right and luck was smiling. Hoss was

KILLER-for-HIRE! ★ ★

Bullets snarled around Hoss' ears as the pursuit got under way. . . .

never one to overlook a set-up like that. He was on his way to Honest John's Gambling Emporium to cash in on his hunch when he saw the crowd gathered around the sheriff's corral. Hoss poked over and was lost.

The sheriff was leading a flashy zebra dun around the enclosure. The brute was full of spirit, a high stepper and the most amazingly striped dun Hoss had ever seen. The striping, usually confined to the upper legs, extended far up on this one's neck and into flank and brisket. Always alert to the unusual, Hoss bought the animal, laughing at a cowboy's drawled remark that: "Sho is bad luck to ride a dead man's pony, Greer, same as to wear a dead man's boots."

The horse, according to the sheriff, had belonged to a bad hombre who rode into town, got full of forty-rod whiskey, pistol whipped a Mexican and was stabbed to death on a dark street by his victim's amigos. A total stranger, without identifying marks or papers, he had died with only a few small coins in his pockets. His effects were being sold to defray the cost of burial. His tooled gunbelt and twin Colt's went to Hoss for less than the cost of a good pistol.

The old cowman felt pretty cocky about it all as he put the zebra dun in the stable with his own pony and headed again for Honest John's. His luck was on the boom and he would ride it with long spurs. But something had happened to that luck, and Hoss had reason to think many times of the cowboy's prediction about a dead man's horse.

First, Honest John's dealer got into Hoss for a thousand dollars—a good fat slice of his profit on the cattle deal. Hanging on desperately, throwing good money after bad, Hoss touched a match to his cigarette, set fire to his mustache and went

to the floor under the deluge of a bucket of slop, hurled by a kind-intentioned bartender. And, if that were not enough, the stableman came in at that moment to tell him that the zebra dun had kicked Hoss's cutting horse, broken its leg, and would he please come over and kill the poor critter. Yes, luck sure changed quick for Old Hoss Greer.

It stayed bad too. When he shot a personal horse that was like one of his family, it kicked down a stall partition, for which the stableman assessed Hoss ten dollars. And another ten for hauling the carcass out where the coyotes could get at it.

Hoss took one look at the half mustache that adorned his lip, gulped a little and had a barber take off the rest. When the barber cut him in the process, Hoss blew higher than a kite. They still refer to that tirade in Gila City as probably the best example of plain and fancy cussing ever to deepen the purple haze surrounding the Superstition Butte.

Thoroughly disgusted and not a little chagrined that Gila City was beginning to laugh at him, Old Hoss forked the zebra dun and spurred it at top speed along the foothill trail toward Tres Alamos, Hoss' home ranch.

"I'll show you a trick or two, you skunk striped hunk uh hell!" he raged. "Kick my top hawss to death, will yuh? You'll pay for that, you wall-eyed cousin to an African jack."

But Hoss had to marvel at the animal's speed, endurance and heart, and wondered if he wasn't astride a better horse than the one he had lost. It looked like the first break in his epidemic of bad luck, until he topped the rise and saw the lone rider tearing toward him.

It was Gil Pastime, foreman of Tres Alamos and more like a son to Hoss than a hired hand.

Gil came loping up, tossed his hand high, sang out: "Howdy, neighbor."

The cowman yelled at him. "Well, where you goin' in such a rush?"

Gil reared his pony, brought him down facing his boss. "Hoss!" he yelped, and his eyes were round with surprise. "What the hell happened to you? Never would have knowed you with that mustache gone. An' that fuzzy. . . . What happened?"

"Not what you're thinkin'," growled the cowman. "I'm as sober as you are. Answer my question! Where you goin' so fast?"

"To find you, of course. More hell, Hoss. You'd hardly got away, when—"

"I hardly ever get away," Hoss sneered in vile humor. "Can't get offa the place till things go wrong. What's the matter? Can't you handle it, Gil? If not I'll soon find me a—"

"I can handle it all right," said Gil, his face hardening, "when it's at my end. This is Stumpy Borden's trouble."

"Stumpy Borden? Hoss scowled, his mind going to the hammered-down little fighting man in charge of Hoss' Wagonhammer outfit in the Carrizo Basin.

The Wagonhammer ran itself and if it came down to a scrap, Stumpy was the best bet Hoss knew to finish it on his two feet. "What's wrong with Stumpy?"

"Dunno, but it's worth lookin' in on. An hour after you left a feller came to the ranch lookin' for you. He talked to me. Name uh Stag Saggett, boss of the Twin S—that run-down outfit in the hills north of your Wagonhammer. He's decided to go in for sheep an' he's bin made field boss for the Bell-Storms Wool Company, of Winslow. They're puttin' up the critters, way I get it—an' the gun-slingers if it comes to a scrap. Said he wanted to buy you out peaceable, but—"

"Yeah?" An icy stream rippled along Hoss' spine, and the woe-begone look of a mustache mourner gave way. "What did you tell him?"

"What yuh think I told him? That you

hated a sheep just a little bit less than the mutton-stunk gents that herd 'em. I offered to bet him up to a thousand simoleons you'd tromp hard on any plans to buy the Wagonhammer for sheep. He got real insulted. Talked big an' nasty, hintin' about it bein' a shame what would happen to them that stood in his way. 'Lowed he wouldn't want to wish that kind uh luck onto a mangy coyote."

Hoss snorted. He didn't like to be reminded of luck, in the light of the immediate past. But luck or no luck, he couldn't sit back and let a powerful sheep syndicate move in on the Wagonhammer and a sawed-off, hammered down gamester with more grit than good sense.

"Think I'll take a run up to the Carrizo," he said.

"I'll go with yuh, boss," Gil said quickly.

"Like hell you will!" Hoss glowered. "You'll go back to Tres Alamos an' tend to business. If I need you, I'll call you quick enough. Be seeing you about a week from today, Gil. Adios."

He reined off the trail, pointing across untracked hills to cut the Carrizo-Rincon freight road. And Gil, looking after him with a rueful pursing of the lips, murmured: "Older he gets the less he thinks of an offer of help. Well, I shore hope this ain't the time his number comes up!"

★

HOSS GREER came riding into Carrizo just as the sun dropped behind the jagged curtain of the Guacalotes. The basin was beautiful; never more so. Late rains had made the grass lush and Hoss, contrasting this upland range with the burned expanse of lower levels, could understand the move being contemplated by the sheep people.

A breath of sweet-scented coolness swept across the flats, bringing the friendly bawling of fat cattle. Dusty purple shadows commenced to settle into the canyons and rincons of the hills and mountains. Just one band of sheep would spoil all this, Hoss thought.

Into the town stable Hoss rode, dismounting wearily. He bent a critical eye on the zebra dun. It had stood up well, awfully well—a whole lot of horse. The barn man, a wizened old fellow, approached with marked hesitancy.

"Stalls are plumb filled for the night, but you might git room at the Traveler's barn, down the street."

Hoss ran his eyes along the empty line of stalls, took stock of the handful of ponies in the corral behind. "In other words, you don't want me in here, do yuh? Why not? What's bein' cooked in here tonight?"

"Oh nothing, mister. Not that. But—"

"Then quit gabblin' an' give this cayuse a rubdown, double grain, an' all the water he'll drink as soon as he's cooled out. Stalls all full, my Aunt Annie!"

He legged out of the barn and was instantly warned. For the scene now had changed, and the men who had been on the street a few moments before were inside or flattened against the fronts. Two men were leading their ponies off the street.

A strung-out silence had taken hold of Carrizo and Hoss was conscious of sultry glances from odd coverts.

Flashing sparks crackled in his brain. Was the sheep war already on? Had death and destruction already struck at the Wagonhammer?

Behind him in the barn door Hoss heard the hostler's step, his low-voiced warning. "Look out, Six Pistol! Watch the Valley Bar, 'cause Del Holder spotted you, an' has been ready for you for ten minutes. I don't owe no gun-slingin' killer nothin', but any man deserves a fair shake for his life. It's Pretty Lukins, an'—watch his left hand!"

The man hadn't quit talking when the

doors of the Valley Bar flapped open and a man walked stiff legged to the middle of the street, turned with military precision and came toward Hoss. The cowman thought, *what the hell is coming off here?* and moved with retarded stride to meet the oncomer.

Now Hoss halted. And, two rods distant, the other paused, his glance as direct as a bullet. He was a young, pink-skinned man with smooth face and altogether disarmingly handsome. His voice was low, controlled and pleasantly modulated.

"Listen, Six Pistol Shride, and listen good. Your call from Stag Saggett was a bad mistake. Even he'll admit it, if he's wise. Turn around and fork your striped mustang. Don't let another sun rise on you in this man's—"

"Bite off the chin slobber," rapped Hoss. "My pony's tried an' I'm hungry. This town looks all right to both of us. Come see me tomorrow an' mebbyso we can make us a deal. As for this Six Pistol you're talkin' about, I don't get you."

"Backin' down, eh? I knowed you were yellow, Six Pistol an' that you'd crawl rather than swap smoke with a real gunie. Well, it don't buy you a thing. Get on your horse an' ride, or I'll blast you down like I would a coyote."

"I wouldn't, Pretty Lukins." The voice came from a knot of men on a saloon porch. "I'll have a little something to say about this, seeing it's me who sent for Six Pistol. If you touch your lead-squirter, it'll be the last one you'll ever draw."

"Shut up!" gritted Hoss. "All right, Lukins. I don't ride out, which puts it up to you. You can bet, or you can pass. An' I don't give a damn which."

"You still think you're good, eh?" Lukins' hand was flashing to the big gun at his thigh and a familiar thrill was chasing along Hoss' nerves as he matched the move. But it was the gunman's left hand he watched, a left hand that curled back to the hem of his coat and came away with a small gun that might easily have passed unseen to its target and earned another notch.

A coyote killer, Hoss thought, and felt all qualms ease off to release nerve and muscle and thought for the test. Then came the crash of lead, shaking Lukins like an ague, lifting him and dumping him into the dust.

★

HOSS had no more than sheathed his gun when that knot of men across the street was upon him, slapping him on the back, laughing delightedly. A large, florid man with two guns belted at his ample middle, made himself heard above the bedlam.

"Good work, Six Pistol! Great work! What did I tell you, boys? Didn't I say he wasn't too old? Didn't I say there never had been a gunman as great as Six Pistol Shride? Come on, ol' son." He linked a heavy arm through Hoss'. "That calls for a big drink. You've just wiped out the Horseshoe gun-slick that was gonna run me an' the sheep right over the summit of the Navajo Rim. I'm Stag Saggett, Six Pistol. Glad to meet yuh. Damn glad, eh boys?"

They capered across the street, half carrying Hoss and finally planting him in front of the long bar inside the Fashion Saloon. Saggett called for everybody to drink on him and Old Hoss swallowed his whiskey, unable to talk for the bedlam about him. Then suddenly the turmoil subsided and all eyes went to the door.

A small, dejected, weary-faced man stood there, eyeing the gathering morosely, and fingering the badge on his vest. His nervous eyes came to rest on the big frame of Stag Saggett.

"I heard the shooting, Mister Saggett," he said, in a meek voice, "and found our friend lying dead in the street. Lukins was bad clear through and bound to get

it sooner or later. I—I know you'll give me the straight of it."

"Sure." Saggett swaggered, laid an arm on Hoss' shoulder with a great show of affection. "My friend here, Six Pistol Shride, was quietly minding his business when Pretty challenged him. Trying to build a gun-rep, I suppose. Anyhow, Six Pistol spotted him the draw an' shot him. I can get a dozen witnesses that it was self-defense. Or is my word good?"

"Er—your word's good enough for me, Saggett. Just so I have the record as straight as possible. Thanks." He turned and went out.

While this had been going on, Old Hoss had been furiously thinking Saggett and the town believed him to be Six Pistol Shride, a desperado who had built a bulky gun-rep by smoking down Mexicans and drunks and oldsters—anybody he had all the edge on. The last Hoss had heard of the man, Shride had been cooling his heels in the New Mexico pen. He could deny being Shride, thought Hoss, but to what end?

Suppose he assumed the rôle, using it as a leverage in whatever skullduggary Saggett undertook. The main danger would be in having the real Shride show up. Hoss grinned. Things would cloud up for war then, and sudden.

"Well," he said, when things had quieted a little and Saggett had turned a beaming face to him. "How'd you know who I was so sudden?"

Saggett looked surprised, drew a thumb smudged paper from one pocket. "Ever see this, Six Pistol?" he grinned.

Hoss unfolded it and read in a cramped, childish hand: Saggett: You heard right; I'm out. Ain't as young as once, an' some of my speed's got away from me. But I'm still fast an' I can do you some good, I figger. An' I can use the money. I'll come on out to Carrizo pronto. You'll know me by the showy zebra dun I'll be ridin'. . . ."

Hoss nodded, handed it back. His poker face revealed none of the excitement he felt. If this was Six Pistol Shride's zebra dun—and there seemed no good reason to doubt it—Six Pistol was probably the man who had been knifed to death in a dark Gila City alley.

"Good," murmured Hoss. "Now I know you're the gent I'm to ride for. No use takin' chances in a deal where the cards are face down. What about Del Holder, boss of the gent who tried to shoot me?"

A thin, triumphant smile edged Saggett's flushed face. Holder'll admit it was self-defense an' like it. Either that, or we'll trim his wick. Can't tell about Del. Maybe he'll be a job for you, mebbyso not. I'll have to think some on that."

"An' while you think," said Hoss, "I'll go out an' put on the nosebag."

Saggett smiled and pulled his beartrap jaw as Hoss went out the batwings. "There," he said to the satellites about him, "is the key I'll use to make this valley mine."

"Suppose," said someone, "the key gets stuck in the lock, Stag?"

"In that case," said the man who dreamed of a sheep empire, "we'll smash the lock with lead. An' the key with it!"

CHAPTER TWO

Hoss Ups the Ante

AS HOSS GREER bowlegged down the boardwalk; he sensed rather than saw the townsfolk shrink back to give him greater elbow room. It was not fear, he knew, but the loathing men feel for a hired gunfighter who sells murder to the highest bidder. Hoss' lips pulled flat and he turned into the American Kitchen.

He growled his order to the young Chink waiter and sat there, highly displeased with himself for not riding right out to the Wagonhammer and having done

with this deception. It was then that he saw the woman come into the restaurant and walk oward him. And her eyes were for nothing nor nobody in the dining room but Hoss himself.

She was little, and she was prim. The years had left her little upon which to expend human vanity, yet Hoss would have been the last to deny that she was cute as a bug's ear. She wore boots beneath the voluminous divided corduroy skirt. A mannish wool shirt was open at the throat, a yellow silk scarf passed under the collar and knotted over her breast. A wealth of iron gray hair held up her pearl gray Stetson and she nervously slapped her doffed right gauntlet into the palm of her left.

Hoss was hoping she would sail right past his seat at the counter, but she halted, spreading her feet and regarding him with undisguised disapproval. "Are you Six Pistol Shride?"

Not until that very minute did Hoss truly make up his mind to play the rôle through. "Yes'm," he said, rising courteously. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes," she said. "There is." And Hoss had never felt so uncomfortable under the eyes of another human. "You're much as I imagined you—cold, heartless, Godless and willing to undertake any crime for money. But I didn't come here to preach to you. I—er—I came to . . ."

Twin spots of color faded from her cheeks and she stood pale and terribly determined before him. "Oh, hang it, I came to hire your gun!"

"But, ma'am—"

"I know," she snapped. "You came here to ride for that Saggett creature. And for money, didn't you? All right, I'll pay you more than he does. Thirty a month added to his best ante. Fair enough?"

"Yes'm, but—"

"Get all you can out of him, man, then add thirty to it and come ride for me. When Jeff Conway died, I lost the best husband in the world and I just couldn't keep up our Circle C—didn't really care to. But when this Saggett person announced he was turning this valley over to sheep, I woke up. 'Amanda,' sez I, 'you got to wake up and fight! Spend some of the money Jeff left you. It's a sweet smelling valley; keep it thataway.' So I'm getting a fighting crew together. Got two pretty good boys so far. You going to make it three?"

Hoss scratched his head. "I dunno, Missus Conway. That'll take some thinkin' over. I'll see Saggett, an'—"

"Take some thinking on my part too," she snapped, and her blue eyes flashed fire. "Reckon I'd have to get purty low-down before I could trust a mercenary killer like you!"

She spun in her tracks and flounced out, her spurs jingling with the vigor of her stiff-legged stride.

When the door had closed behind her, the other patrons were trying to hide their grins. And Hoss had little appetite for the food the waiter was fetching. He gulped a few bites, washed them down with a cup of coffee, paid and went out. Darkness had come to the Carrizo and the town lamps cast friendly rectangles of light onto the walks.

Into one of those blobs of light, Hoss saw the Widder Conway pause, open a door and enter.

That was the only reason why, walking idly past the place, he glanced at the name lettered on the dusty window. It read: "Del Holder, Ranches—Mines—Water Rights—Cattle—Loans."

Del Holder was the man who had watched him up coming across the valley. The man who had sent Pretty Lukins—a coyote killer—out to kill him as he rode into town!

Hoss grinned. He could take no personal offense in the attempt on his life. For really it had been an attempt on the life of a man committed to the ruination

of this beautiful stretch of cow-country.

Indeed, in that moment Hoss felt his first pang of regret at having found it necessary to kill a man who was really on his side in this fight. And he felt a touch of admiration for Del Holder, who was apparently more—much more—than just a cowman. A business man with his connections would be no mean ally in a fight against sheep. Hoss had posted a reflection that he would meet and talk with Holder when the man's voice came striking through the panel, upraised in anger.

"Look here, old lady, you're stubborn as a burro and senseless as a horny toad! Time and again I've offered you more than your run-down Circle C is worth. Now I offer you twice bank appraisal, and you turn it down!"

"'Course I turn it down," came the Widder Conway's purposeful voice. "The outfit ain't for sale. We've been all over it before and there's no use troubling me further with offers. I'm hiring a crew—gun-fighters preferred—to take care of this sheep threat and put the Circle C on a paying basis. Only way we think alike, Del Holder, is about sheep. I'll coöperate to the limit with you on that."

"Put that in writing," said the agent so suddenly as to even startle Hoss. "I will write it out."

"I'll sign nothing in this office, Del Holder. I don't—"

"—don't trust me, eh?" Holder was sneering, and then his voice got thick. "You little devil, I've had about enough out of you. You're going to deed me that ranch of yours, or hard luck is . . ."

"Take your hand off." Amanda Conway was trying to remain calm. "You're hurting me. Stop it."

"I'll stop it!" Holder was beside himself. "I don't know why I've put up with you as long as I have. Tonight, after the town's asleep, you and me are riding out to Circle C and settling this once and for all. You're going to visit relatives, far—"

Amanda Conway's stifled voice muffled under a heavy hand, was crying for help as Old Hoss stepped into the office. With only the faint tinkle of his spurs to betray his entry, he swerved around the end of a short counter, past a safe and into a private cubby behind.

Del Holder, as large a man as Saggett, but in a softer, better-fed sort of way, was holding the widow with one hand that prevented her screaming, fending off her spirited struggles with the other. Hoss leaped at him.

★

THE man saw the flash of the old cowman's body from the corner of his eye. He loosed his hold on the Widder Conway and turned to face this new menace—a menace which in his guilt must have loomed up as utter ruin. He was reaching for the big gun under his left arm when Hoss hit him squarely between the eyes with the arcing barrel of his six-shooter. Holder dropped like a gunned beef, not even kicking.

Hoss sheathed his gun and turned to the widder. "Reckon this wasn't none of my horn-in, ma'am," he said. "But I happened to overhear what he said, an' figgered . . ."

He fell silent under her stern gaze. She was pale and still frightened and shocked. Her eyes, he thought, still held the loathing she felt for his kind—and something else.

"You heard a man come out from behind his mask," she explained. "I've never trusted Holder, and he has proved my mistrust justified. I think he would have killed me tonight except for . . . Well, thank you, Mister Shride. You prove that there is good in even the worst of men. Yes, I thank you!"

Old Hoss flamed. "You don't know

anything about me, ma'am, except what you've heard somebody say. You think you've got any right to judge me on that evidence?"

"Maybe not," she said, managing to smile. "I apologize. Maybe Saggett has been fooled by your reputation. If so, and he finds it out, come out to the Circle C. The least I could do would be to repay you with a job. Thanks again. . . . And good night."

She stepped past him and went out, leaving Hoss smarting and grudgingly appreciative of Amanda Conway's quick mind.

The man on the floor groaned, bringing Hoss back to the present. Holder was still out, but beginning to come around. Savagely, Hoss snatched the gun from the man's Texas holster, cocked it and ruined it by smashing down on the firing pin with the barrel of his own piece. Replacing the weapon, he walked outside and down to the Fashion Saloon. He found Saggett in a back room, with a number of hard-eyed gun-toters.

"Ready to listen to your proposition, Saggett," he said, and helped himself to a cigar from the box on the table. "I hate to be driftin' loose."

"What's the matter, Shride?" sneered Saggett. "Didn't the Widder Conway offer you enough? She didn't, an' she won't! Her outfit is chicken-roost stuff, an' when I'm ready I'll buy it for a song. The old gal talkin' fight—that's a joke!"

Old Hoss cocked up his feet, lighting his cigar and studying Saggett. In the man's broad, high-cheeked face was a ruthless and stubborn will to rule. In the sneering, down-curving lips was selfishness, greed, total lack of consideration for others. In his small, close-set eyes was deceit and treachery. Hoss sized him up in one three letter word—"Bad!"

"What you tryin' to do, Saggett?" Hoss asked him. "Drive me into the arms of your enemies?"

The man's heavy brows lifted in surprise. "I wouldn't wish that on nobody," he said. "My plans is all made an' I'm ready to go. You can get in at a hundred a month an' ca'tridges. Interested?"

"I'd be lyin' if I said no. What am I gettin' into? Range grab?"

"You guessed it. You'll be gunnin' for the Sheep Syndicate. Plenty men an' money behind you. Already I've got the little outfits an' nesters won over. The fight will be against three outfits—the Horseshoe, owned by Del Holder; the Wagonhammer, owned by a glandered-up ol' gunfighter name uh Hoss Greer an' rodded by a fightin' fool named Stumpy Borden; an' Ol' Lady Conway's Circle C—once the most powerful cattle spread in this county."

"Sounds sorta risky if they all throw in together," ventured Hoss.

"Which they won't. Holder's been tryin' to buy the widder, an' there's no love lost between 'em. Stumpy Borden's as independent as a hog on ice. Anyhow, the minute I make Holder any kind of an offer to share in this sheep deal, he'll jump at it like a hungry coyote. Borden an' his men will be rubbed out. An' the Widder Conway . . ."

"Aim to make war on a woman, eh Saggett?"

"She'll be on the losing side, Shride. So will you if you go with her. What did she offer?"

"Enough to make it interesting," Hoss said, tight-lipped.

"She ain't makin' it, but mebby she's got it. If you go with her, you'll get it where your suspenders cross. I ain't foolin' here, Shride. I'm in this to win. Hundred an' twenty-five a month. Last offer. Take it or leave it."

Hoss rose, dropped the cigar into a spitoon. "If your job's no better than your seegars, Saggett," he snapped, "I wouldn't be interested. I'll sleep on it. Let you know tomorrow." He walked

out, his back muscles twitching with the looks Saggett and his hirelings sent after him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hoss Greer—Sheepherder!

HOSS registered at the Carrizo House, followed the crippled night clerk to a room on the second floor. For a minute he stood listening to the clerk's steps on the main staircase. Then he locked the door from the hall side and tiptoed down the poorly lighted corridor and out the rear. Quickly he descended the outside staircase and strode to the Feed Barn.

The hostler was asleep and snoring in his cubby office. Hoss didn't wake him. He saddled the zebra dun and rode out to the Circle C.

There was light in the ranch house and three ponies at the rack. From the bunkhouse came half-hearted chordings of a guitar. Hoss busted in without knocking.

Two old timers and a beardless youth looked up in surprise. "Whatever from hell?" said one of the graybeards.

"The widder," said Hoss. "She got company?"

"You guessed it, brother. Why?"

When Hoss asked, "Who?" they glowered at him.

"Dunno how you kin expect a answer," said an old timer. "But I'll be mannerly, if you ain't. Stumpy Borden is with her. Talkin' fightin' business."

"Thanks," said Hoss. "Fightin's my business too. Nume uh Six Pistol Shride." He turned out, closing the door, and an awed whisper followed him.

A weak, timid an' stoveup crew, thought Hoss. And the widder aimed to restore the glory of the Circle C with such.

Hoss rapped at the door and the widder opened. "Mister Shride!" A hint of gladness edged her voice. "Here to take my offer, I'll betcha. Gentlemen, this is the fam—er—notorious gunman, Six Pistol Shride. Meet Mister Borden and two Wagonhammer men."

Hoss shook, avoiding Stumpy's direct gaze. However, his disguise should protect him, seeing he had hired Stumpy through a mutual friend and had seen him only twice.

He found himself the object of Stumpy's appraisal. And when they were all seated, he said, "I got an offer of a hundred an' a quarter from Saggett, ma'am."

"I'll pay a hundred and fifty. Worth it ain't it, Mister Borden?" Amanda beamed.

Stumpy studied. "Can't rate a gun in dollars, ma'am. An' this trouble won't drag out no month. Saggett an' his sheep will plow us under in ten days, or the buzzards will be eatin' mutton. I come to leave a man with you, Miz Conway, but if you hire Shride . . ." He hesitated, fixed Hoss with a scowl. "You singin' with her, Shride?"

"Like this," said Hoss. "I'll ride with Saggett, learn his game and wise you."

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"Oh, no," hummed the widder. "If you draw my pay, you work right here."

"Then I don't draw your pay," snapped Hoss. "Nor Saggett's. I'm overpaid if I help rid the Carrizo of sheep. You ought to see the good of havin' a spy in Stag's camp."

"Mister Shride," the widder frosted, "I don't like your tone."

"Whoa up, both of you," said Stumpy. "Mebbe he's got something, Miz Conway. If he'd tip us off with straight information. . . ."

"It'll be staight," said Hoss. "Who can you trust to fetch word?"

"Lem Cottle, night barnman at the Town Stables. I'd trust him all the way."

"But how far can we trust Shride?" asked the widow. "Not far. I'm calling the whole thing off. I'm afraid to fight fire with fire. Cowboys maybe, but not killers."

"Suits me." Hoss rose dejectedly, walked from the room.

He was waiting for Stumpy, when the foreman came out. "Borden," he said. "I'm takin' cards, job or no job. You'll hear from me. . . . An' thanks!"

An hour later he was in his hotel bed, cussing females in general and puzzling over a strange hurt inside him. Something he'd et, likely. And yet always before his eyes swam a cute little face with upturned nose and blue eyes that flashed fire.

Next morning Hoss had breakfast and smoked away a couple hours before Saggett came in with two gun-hung bodyguards. "Hope you smoke a gun faster than you make up yore mind," he greeted Hoss. "How about you an' me?"

"I'm goin' along with you," Hoss said sourly. "An' I don't like that sneer in yore voice."

"Joshin', Shride, joshin'." Saggett slapped Hoss on the shoulder, led the way into the back room of the Fashion Saloon and poured the drinks. "Mighty glad you're in. Tonight we make our move."

"Raid them other outfits?"

"Nothin' so crude. If there's any jumpin' done, they'll jump us after they discover ten thousand woolies at their doorsteps. We barge in from both sides. Four thousand odd down Apache Gulch, from Conejos Meadows. Five thousand down Feather Creek Gorge out of Turkey Mesa. We'll leave here about four. Don't make me hunt you."

Hoss walked out, spotted Old Lem Cottle sitting with the day man, outside the feed barn. As Hoss joined them, the day man was called to harness a drummer's team. And Hoss got right down to business. "You an' Stumpy Borden good friends, Cottle?"

The old man started. "Best kind, Shride. Why? You better not smoke him, or . . ."

Hoss placed his hand on the old fellow's knee. When he took it away, a five dollar bill rested there. "Take it easy, old timer. Your rheumatism calls fer some saddle whackin'. Take a ride for your health, out to the Wagonhammer. Remark to Stumpy, casual, that sheep will be comin' down Apache Gulch an' down Feather Crick, come moon-up."

Lem Cottle crushed the bill, staring. "Y-yeah. . . . Holy cripes! I'll do 'er if it kills me. An', by godfreys, I'll belt on a smoke-wagon, an' warm it. Mister, I was all wrong. You ain't like the Six Pistol Shride *I've* heard about!"

★

FROM that moment on, Hoss hung around the Fashion Saloon, where Saggett was interviewing hard looking men. Young, chill-eyed, saddle toughened men who scorned the work of the working cowboy.

Around midafternoon, Saggett tolled off a score of boys and sent them out to the ranch. An hour later, Hoss went with

Saggett and as many more. The town stared after them.

The town knew hell was due to bust open.

There were forty warriors, beside those at the ranch. Hoss prayed that Lem Cottle was as good a friend as Stumpy believed. Saggett's Twin S proved to be quite a place—new pitchy buildings standing on the site of a homesteader's shacks. Chink cooks served supper in the long cook shack, and afterward the men lolled in the yard, smoking, talking, waiting for word from Saggett.

Hoss held apart, worrying a little, contemptuous of these human jackals. With the promise of a full moon in the east, one of Saggett's lieutenants raised a call for saddles. The men rushed for the corrals, but Hoss elected to stick with the zebra dun.

As he drew the cinch, a harsh voice called the men delegated for Conejos Meadows. Trappings jingled. Someone raised a laugh and the segundo—a man called Whang—cursed him to silence. A word was given. Hoof echoes lifted sharply and the cavalcade departed.

Time dragged and the oppressiveness thickened. The moon pitched over the tumbled eastern horizon, big and red and round. Saggett came out, roaring for men to mount.

"You're drivin' sheep tonight," he growled. "So get guns out of your heads."

At a hard lope he led them into the Guacalotes, climbing sharply. The men were silent; the horses heaving and grunting. An hour saw them in the piny parks on top. Here Hoss smelled sheep, and soon they came upon the bleating horde, moving toward the breaks of Feather Creek. After that it was all stinking, blatting woolies, barking dogs, shouting men. With Hoss feeling guilty. This was his first sheep-herding!

Down a steep slant the flock poured, three riders in the lead, the rest on the flanks or bringing up the rear. Dust boiled and eddied in the moonglow. A shrill wolf yipping from the van told that the leaders were already in the canyon bottom. After that the hills drew in until sheep filled the sandy bottom and the sheer walls rose blackly to the stars. Down this defile they wound for an hour, Hoss riding behind Saggett, hearing nothing but the interminable plaint of the unhappy bleaters.

Presently the walls began to diverge and lose height. Through the dust, Hoss had a vision of the moon-drenched valley floor. And then he had the sense of the great flock suddenly backing up on itself. The zebra dun was swerving to avoid stepping upon the brutes. Everything halted except the plaintive crying of the sheep.

Saggett's great voice lifted over the clamor of the woolies. "Tack, Soda, Pete! Bust through an' find what's wrong up there. An' don't stop to stomp yore feet. In five minutes we can lose a thousand head by trompin'. What ails them boys in the lead?"

As if in answer to his query, the harsh, bitter echoes of gunfire tore up the drainage line.

Hoss broke out a high yell, knowing Stumpy and the boys were up there stopping the invasion where it was the most vulnerable. His wild hollering as well as the howled curses of Saggett was blotted out in the roar of gunfire and the increased bleating of the terrified sheep. The animals broke up the steep slopes on either hand. Riders sailed after them, swinging quirts, blasting away with six-shooters to turn the brutes. Others plowed their way through the milling, clogging flock to get at enemy gunman. Sheep were breaking to all points of the compass, even back the way they had come.

Hoss kept the zebra dun busy, leaping here and there, blasting away with his gun and hollering like a Comanche. That was just in case Saggett or some of his

men might be watching. But he saw to it that no shot was wasted. Three times he emptied and filled and emptied his two guns into the surging flock, making a lot of good woolies—good and dead.

Saggett and his men blasted their way through to the battle-line, a nesting of huge boulders at the mouth of the canyon. Gunfire rose to a high and savage crescendo and then Saggett and about half his men came roweling back up the draw, shooting at vague shadows behind them. Hoss fell in with that stampede, although he was sorely tempted to join the victorious warriors of the Wagonhammer.

At the rim, the Twin S men drew rein to rest their ponies, staring into the valley where gun flashes bit the gloom at the mouths of Feather Creek and Apache Gulch. Old Hoss was both jubilant and uneasy.

Saggett was cursing wildly. The real hell would come when he calmed down and began really to think. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Carrizo Basin War

AT DAWN, Stag Saggett stood on the porch of the Twin S, glowering at a score of battered followers. His eyes were bloodshot, his face lined. Half his gun-crew had fallen, wrecking his hope of immediate victory. For them he wasted few regrets, but more than nine thousand sheep were dead or scattered. For them he must answer to the Syndicate. His taciturn face settled.

"Somebody wised 'em up," he suddenly blurted. "Who done it? Not any of them boys layin' dead out yonder, but one of you." His finger accused them. "A damn traitor sold us out fer a few bloody dollars, an' reckon I know who it was!"

"His glance fixed Old Hoss venomously. "Six Pistol Shride, step out an' deny it."

A chill froze Hoss' cheeks as he stood forth, hands on his guns. Silence fell over the yard and Hoss felt the urge to kill rising in them. "Damn right I deny it!" he roared. "If you had the sense God give a fool hen, you'd know I couldn't have did it."

Saggett glared. "You bin playin' me against the Widder Conway from the first."

"Which has nothin' to do with it," snapped Hoss nastily. "You know I ain't seen the widder since you signed me on. I ain't bin outa your sight since. Just how far you willin' to go to saddle me with yore troubles, Saggett?"

Saggett didn't answer at once, just stroked his jaw and glowered.

"The one called Whang fingered a lurid bullet cut and turned to his boss. "You're off on the wrong foot, just like you was last night," he sneered. "Shride never left the Fashion all day, an' you know it. You've got pulled down off yore high an' mighty perch, an' you'll get pulled lower. I've had enough of you an' the Twin S an' sheep. Pay me off!"

Saggett's eyes chilled. "You wouldn't quit me cold, in a pinch like this."

"You don't mean nothin' in my life. Pay me."

"All right, Whang." Sadly Saggett turned. Then he was spinning back, drawing.

Whang saw it coming, but he was too far behind. Saggett's bullet knocked him spinning. The man tried, with iron resolution, to line his gun. But Death dimmed his sight. He collapsed, and Saggett eyed the rest challengingly.

"There's your traitor," he announced. "He good as confessed. Who's the next one?"

They waited, no one answering. Hoofbeats intruded into the silence and everybody turned. Out of the creek bottom came a score of riders, led by Dapper Del Holder.

He drew rein, addressing Saggett. "You've lost the first battle, Stag," he said, "but that don't win the war. I'm bettin' on you an' stakin' my outfit on your promise of a half cut in the business."

"There's the word of a friend." Excitedly Saggett leaped to Holder's horse, pulled the man down and embraced him. "That's the strength we need, boys. Now we'll strike at them coyote nests with bullet an' fire—tonight!"

They cheered what they had always held to be the proper attack. Jugs were uncorked and the drinking began. Hoss held aloof, worried panicky. How could he get word to Stumpy?

Striking unexpectedly, Saggett might easily win and consolidate his gains before the sluggish law stepped in. He listened to the plan unfold. Midnight, and a murderous attack on the Wagonhammer and Circle C. A double wipeout! Plenty witnesses to swear the cow faction started it.

Presently Saggett slept, and those who had gone through the night's hell snored lustily. Utterly worn out, Old Hoss used every device to keep awake, hoping for a chance to get away. But Holder and his men, unwearied, played cards and talked over the angles of the night attack until the Chinks' supper call woke everybody. They trooped to the cook shack and afterward lolled around, smoking and waiting.

Hoss saddled his zebra dun, determined to make a break at the first opportunity. Fate, rather than his own judgment, presented the chance.

Along about ten o'clock, during a lull in the talk, somebody said: "Hawssbacker comin', boys. Look alive."

With everybody's attention riveted on the approaching lone horseman, Hoss edged his pony a little farther from the main group.

There was a loud hullo, then Saggett booming: "Come in an' show yoreself! Who is it?"

"I'm scairt to tell," laughed the rider, and pushed into their midst. "Where's Stag Saggett?"

And when Stag identified himself: "I'm sorry to show up so late, Stag, but I couldn't make it sooner. Feller stole my zebra hawss an' I stole a cayuse to take after him. I got caught an' jailed. I'd uh bin hung shore if they'd knowed I was Six Pistol Shride!"

Old Hoss Greer didn't wait. He forked the zebra dun, jabbed in the spurs and dusted, hanging low over the withers. Behind him a yell lifted, dominated by Saggett's roaring. Hoss could hear the scuffle of horses being saddled, the sound of men running.

A smash of gunfire. Bullets snarling around Hoss' ears. Then he was safe in the creek bottom, the fleet dun clawing it back. He was a full half mile ahead when pursuit got under way, riding slanting, sending his wild yells back at them. What a lucky break, Hoss thought, that Six Pistol showed when he did. If it had happened yesterday, it would have cost Hoss his life. It was a good omen.

While still a half mile from the Wagonhammer, Hoss lifted his voice in a lobo bellow. "Stumpy!" he bawled. "Stumpy Borden! Gunplay comin' at yuh, hell-a-tilt! Saggett's comin' on the shoot. Hoss Greer a-yodlin'. Tumble out, you Wagonhammer waddies."

Over and over again he howled it, until he was so close he could hear Stumpy's answering holler and see the scuttling forms of men, and moonlight on the rifle-barrels.

Then, instead of joining his own fighting men, Hoss reined hard right, ducked through a fringe of creek willows that screened him perfectly. Saggett, he reasoned, would establish his gun seige of the Wagonhammer and then make a play at the Circle C with as few men as possible. All Hoss' chips were on meeting Stag there.

GUNFIRE back at the Wagonhammer was plainly audible when Hoss came pelting through the Circle C gate.

A challenge greeted him: "Haul up, hawssbacker! Holler yore brand or take a bullet!"

"Six Pistol Shride!" Hoss used the name they would respect. "Get them lights out, fools. You, old timer, take that guitar-pickin' kid onto yonder haystack. An' you, feller, climb atop that water tank with a rifle an' plenty ca'tridges. Saggett's raidin' tonight an' we want to be ready if he hits here!"

"Oh . . . It's you, Mister Shride!" Amanda Conway came running from the house. "What is it? What's all the shooting? Last night it was—"

"Last night was sky-pilot hell," snapped Hoss. "But that was last night. Now Saggett's raidin' Wagonhammer an' I didn't have a chance to warn 'em fur in advance. If they come here I want you where I can look after you."

"The house," she said. "Come on. And hurry!"

"The barn," he countered. "The back door's corral closed an' it's only a whoop an 'a holler to the crick. I bin through all this before." As he talked, Hoss was leading his pony into the willows, and the widder was clinging to one arm, trotting to keep up.

"Mister Shride," she said, when he was tieing the dun. "You don't know how sorry I am about the way I acted. I just can't tell you. . . ."

"Then don't," he barked, hurrying her back to the big barn. "Save your breath for runnin'." And he was grinning at her meekness. Gotta talk up to wimmen, he reflected. Gotta tell 'em what-fer. Don't make 'em think no less of a man!

In the barn, Hoss got Amanda into a dry stall, behind a bulwark of baled hay. He was looking into the night, listening to the crackle of gun blasts at the Wagonhammer, when the lookout on the windmill tank called: "Here they come, Shride. Six, looks like I'll hold till you holler."

"All set an' ready here," came a call from the haystack.

The six horsemen came with coyote yipping, fanned out and blasting shots at the sky to intimidate the widder. They reared their mounts before the house. Fierce joy hit Hoss as Saggett's heavy voice boomed: "Come on out, Widder, an' prove yo're not against Stag Saggett. Come out here!"

As if in answer, a bawl of terror came from the corral, a rising clatter of split hoofs, crash of fence poles and the sound of a cow critter stirring dust and bawling bloody murder.

"Whatever from hell is that?" demanded Hoss.

"It's Mehitabel," wailed the widder. "The brutes have scared the best little milch cow in Mesquite County. Drove her right through the fence. I'll never see her again.

She darted to the barn door, eluding Hoss' grasp. "Stag Saggett, you good-for-nothing polecat, if I get my hands on you, I'll—I'll—"

Saggett led his men to the barn. "Look here, Widder. A bunch of crooks, workin' for an old codger who cares nothin' for the Carrizo, has set about to ruin me. So far, you're on their side. I'll overlook it if you set a price on this outfit right here, an' agree to quit this valley. Otherwise."

"But, Mister Saggett," protested the widder. "Mister Shride says. . . ."

"He's a imposter," roared Saggett. "I've got the real Six Pistol Shride right here with me. Tell her, Shride!"

"All I gotta say—" a rider put his horse forward—"is to lemme get one look at the gent callin' hisself Six Pistol Shride. No man kin take my name. I'll smoke him down!"

From the moment the widder had left her covert, Hoss was moving. Down to the end of the stall corridor he went, out the

door, under the corral fence at the corner of the barn and along the side to the front, as the killer finished his speech.

Hoss let him finish, then he stepped into the clear.

"You asked for it, Shride," he said, his voice taut. "You'll get it!"

The roar of those six men shot to high heaven, and Shride was screaming profanity as he drew. His horse was fiddle-footing and Hoss was reeling toward him as Shride shot—and missed! Hoss released his withheld fire.

Shride screamed: "He got me . . ." and his body plumped against the ground.

Out of that chaotic confusion another gunshot echoed and was answered from the top of the water tank. Saggett's pony, struck in the neck, went down, threshing. And whipsawed by those fanned and backing riders, Hoss went down, a bullet through his thigh. From the ground he raked the nearest rider, and a riderless horse shunted swiftly out of the focus of battle.

Guns crackled from the haystack and two more of the Twin C killers were unhorsed and out of it. That left one, and he knew when the going was sweet. He whirled and spurred and seemed safe. The oldster on the tank, firing steadily, pulled him down as the night was about to swallow him. And the sound of racing boot echoes struck into the aching silence following gun-chaos.

"That's all," howled Hoss, and dragged himself up. Hopping crazily, his shot leg a torment, Hoss hobbled after the fleeing Twin C boss. And cornered him in the granery.

At least, in the deceptive moonlight, he thought so. Scorning any show of caution, Hoss hobbled right up to the door, his keen old eyes probing, his gun ready. A bullheaded thing to do, he thought, yet there might be a chance. . . .

"Game's played out, Saggett," he rapped. "You deserve killin', but I'm willin' for the law to have you if you quit."

Hoss was reaching for a jamb to help negotiate the low step when the faint sound of a bootstep struck to his left ear and one long cold stream of warning poured through Hoss' fibers.

His eyes swiveled and he saw Saggett swaying around the corner of the granery. Evidently he hadn't entered, but had circled the shed. The moment of pause Hoss allowed himself was like a long day of waiting. Saggett was planted and waiting, silent and deadly.

Hoss' nerves and muscles and mind seemed locked for age-long seconds, then a sharp nervous laugh came to his lips. "Well I'm damned, Saggett! You're as scairt of me as if I really was Six Pistol Shride! How about even draw, me an' you?"

"I'm scairt of no man," said Saggett. "Holster yore iron an' face me. An' tell me who you are."

Hoss lowered his gun to his leather, slowly turning. He knew now why Saggett hadn't killed him sooner. Curiosity is a powerful force in the human mind. Hoss believed he had stirred the man's vanity in suggesting the duel, but he knew different as the click of a cocking hammer came to his ear. No man cocks his gun before holstering. Hoss stiffened, swayed and tilted his gun.

★

THE two guns exploded almost as one, but Hoss' bullet had hammered Saggett's from his hand. Yellow moonlight glowed upon them both. Saggett's heavy jaws were slowly working and his eyes were like two jet beads. Hoss said: "Snakeblood, Saggett! A coyote trick!" He holstered his gun. "I'll give you another chance. Go pick it up an' start shootin'."

Silence met him, and that same stiff, intolerant glare. Saggett seemed fashioned

of granite. Then something gave way in him and his body hit the ground. He didn't move again.

Hoss moved over to stand above him. The bullet, he knew, had deflected from the gun-barrel and into Saggett's vitals. But the eyes were open and the moon shone into them, revealing the same bitter cynicism and the same hard curiosity.

The lips moved and the words came like a sigh. "You ain't no fake. You're fast—faster'n Six Pistol! Say—who in hell are you?"

The cold inhumanity that characterized Hoss Greer in his gun-escapades ebbed from his face and he snapped with a healthy anger. "Damn you, Saggett, an' all yore kind! Why do you coyotes have to rise to challenge the rights of honest men? I'm Hoss Greer; ever hear of me? Now roll over an' die!"

He limped toward the house, his pale eyes letting the chill of aftermath creep into their flames.

The three Circle C hands came over to hail him, and then they had him in the kitchen and Amanda was bandaging his hurt with gentle fingers. And while she worked, she wept.

Finally it got on Hoss' nerves. "Hush up that squawlin', woman," he cried. "If you had any gratitude to a man, you'd be laughin' that Saggett's gone an' his outfit will fall apart for want of a leader. Ain't you got good sense?"

"Oh, I'm not thinking of Saggett, or you, or anybody else," she burst out, her face contorted with grief. "I'm thinking of poor Mehitabel, out there on the range, running her heart out. I'm just sick about it!"

Hoss fixed the last pin in the bandage, jerked his head to the wide-eyed youth. "Go fetch my zebra pony from the bosky, sonny. Don't hear no shootin' at my Wagonhammer, so I reckon I'll head yonderly to see how Stumpy made out."

An hour later, Wagonhammer warriors came riding down from the hills, flushed and victorious after chasing the broken Twin S men out of the valley. Down near the axis of the valley they spotted a lone rider hazing a lone cow critter. They tore down to intercept him.

"It's that feller callin' himself Six Pistol Shride," barked Stumpy, and rode right up to the gray faced man. "Look here, feller," he said. "We plugged Del Holder a spell ago. An' before he died, he said you wasn't no more Six Pistol Shride than he was. Who the hell are you?"

"I," said Hoss, "am the loud-mouthed gent that warned you Saggett was comin'."

Stumpy's eyes grew wide. "By godfrey, not the boss? Not Hoss?"

"The same," said the cowman. "Sorry I couldn't join you, but I had business with Saggett an' Six Pistol at the Circle C."

Stumpy looked at Hoss' bloody pants-leg. "You killed 'em?" he grinned.

"How'd you guess." Hoss' eyes were twinkling. "War's over, boys."

They yelled their joy and Stumpy grew instantly solicitous. "You come right over to the ranch an' get into bed," he ordered. "I'll send a boy over for a sawbones. Then me an' the others are goin' back an' root out some more of them Twin S night-riders."

"Sorry." Hoss shook his head. "Gotta drive the widder's cow home, boys. An' she won't hear to nothin' but my lettin' her take care of me till I'm robust again. You know how it is with the gals. Well, so-long, fellers. Soon as I'm able, I'll drop over to see are you earnin' what I pay you!"

He gigged the zebra dun with his good leg and rode after the bawling milch cow. And as he rode, he was whistling *The Gal I Left Behind Me.*

He looked ahead, not back. . . .

THE END

ROAD-BRANDED!

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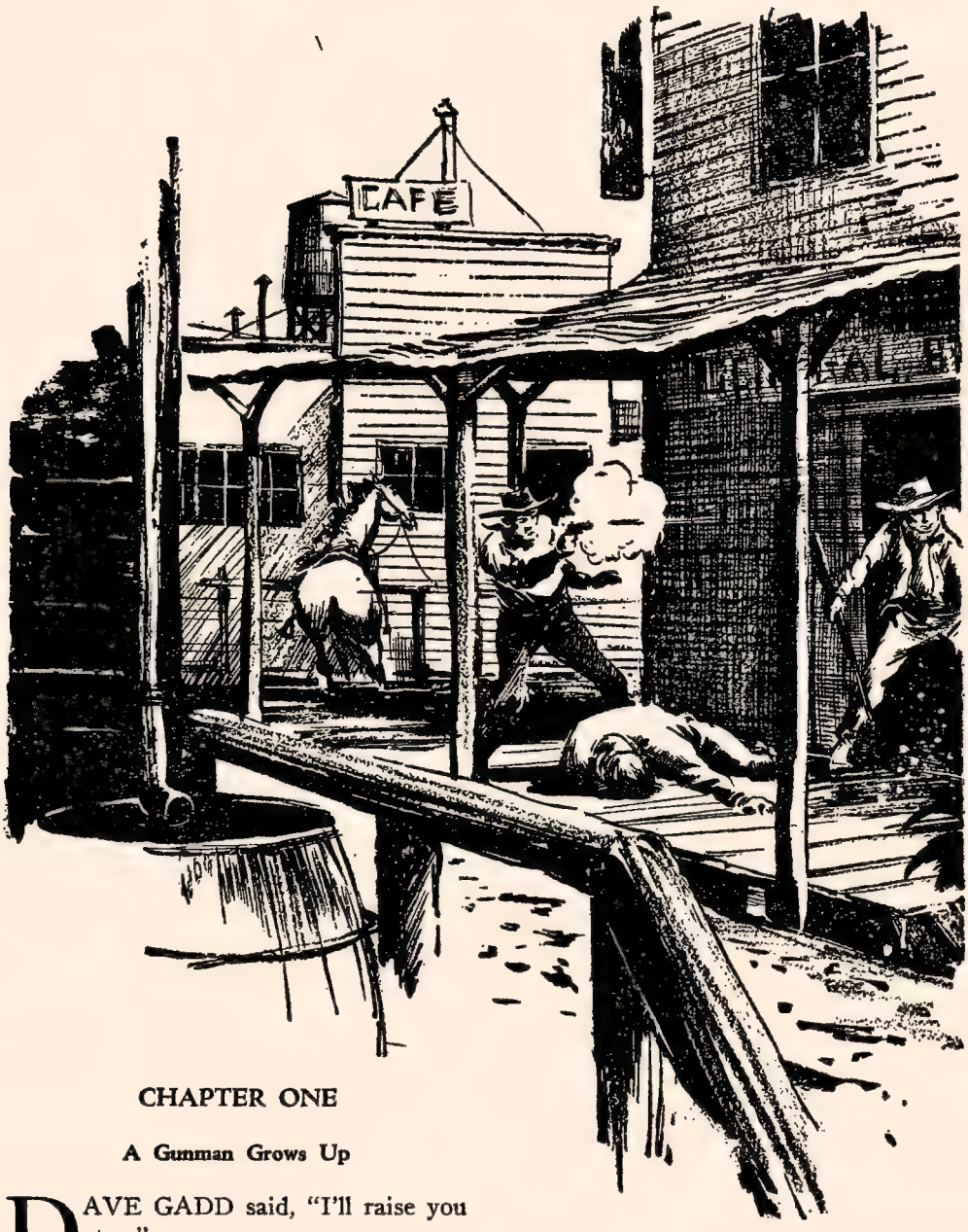

CHAPTER ONE

A Gumman Grows Up

DAVE GADD said, "I'll raise you ten."

Bull Coster, the burly mine foreman, growled, "I'll call."

The Boston Café was full of Saturday night roisterers. But at the poker table in the corner, the five men were oblivious of the noise.

Count Pashkow, saturnine and narrow-shouldered, somber in his black gambler's

FIGHTING MAN! ★ ★

A no-good, drunken trouble-maker about summed up the opinion of respectable folks of young Dave Gadd. Oddly, a bandit bullet in the body of the lawman who'd last jailed him sent Dave out alone—a cold-eyed fighting machine—straight to the waiting grave where glory dwelt!

He aimed carefully for the fleeing rider. . . .

Fast-Moving Boom-Town Novel

costume, said softly, "I raise twenty dollar."

Bull Coster threw down his hand in rage. Dave Gadd picked up his last chips and flung them in. His green eyes were reckless, a broad grin stretched across

his plain face. He said, "I got three aces!"

"A small straight, Davey," said Pashkow, almost apologetically. "You got no luck today, Davey."

Bull Coster leaped to his feet, upsetting his chair. "That damned Russian is crooked! He got that card off the bottom!"

The mine foreman was reaching for the gun on his hip.

Pashkow turned pale but made no move, his dark eyes fastened on Coster. Dave Gadd's big hands seized the table top and pushed.

The edge of the table caught Coster and pushed him off balance. Dave came to his feet and jumped.

Coster got the gun out and was bringing it around, his twisted features wild with rage. Dave let go with a swinging hook. His left fist caught Coster on the jaw.

The miner went down as if he had been shot. Dave kicked once and the drawn gun slid across the floor and out onto Grand Avenue, the main street of Grade.

Dave drawled, "Those miners oughtn't to be allowed to tote hardware. They're all the time trying to shoot somebody. The Count's no crook. Everybody knows that!"

There were other miners from the hills in the Boston Cafe, but none moved. Coster was not popular among his own kind.

Dave walked to the bar and said, "Somebody buy me a drink. I'm broke and out of a job and I'm about to turn loose my wolf. Tom Carter will throw me in jail and pay off my debts. Who'll buy?"

Count Pashkow came forward timidly. He said, "Davey, better you should sleep it off. Look, Davey, I'll split back the money I won from you. You were drunk, and maybe I shouldn't have taken it from you."

Dave made a wide gesture. "Sure, I'm drunk. But someone was bound to get it. Better you than somebody like that Coster!"

The mine foreman was getting to his feet. He started forward, fists swinging. The bartender and a couple of bystanders seized him and led him into the back room.

His voice came, "I'll kill that no-account, worthless Gadd. I'll kill him, the big dummy!"

Dave downed his drink. He said, "Thanks, Count. Now lemme get out there and raise hell. It's about time for Tom Carter to show up."

He rolled his great bulk out of the bar and beamed upon the stirrings of the citizenry of Grade. It was almost midnight, and the town was going wide open and full blast.

Deputy Marshal Cob Chaffee, lank and sour-visaged, lounged near the bank building. Marshal Jack Moody was down at the far end of Grand Avenue, his shotgun in hand, keeping order among the men from the mines. Dave's foot kicked against the gun which he had taken from Coster.

He bent and picked up the weapon. It was a Colt .44, such as most men wore. There were two notches in the butt. Dave aimed it at the New Mexican sky and let go with two shots.

"I'm a curly Gadd, and who cares for wolves?" he yowled. "I'm on the prod and the grizzlies are hunting their caves! *Yippee!*"

He fire again and looked down the street towards Cob Chaffee hopefully. He had never liked Cob. Of course, it was Marshal Moody's business to quell local disturbances, but Sheriff Tom Carter usually took care of Dave. Maybe Cob would take it up, and then Dave could have a fine fight.

When Dave was drunk, it was always a fight to which he aspired. It was a hold-

over from his orphaned youth, when he had to fight to exist. He had fought himself out of every job he ever had, and had cheerfully fought himself back up to foreman of this or that ranch throughout Coquina County.

Count Pashkow, thin, hollow-cheeked, blonde-moustached, came out of the Boston and said, "Davey, stop it. What's the sense, Davey?"

"I'm a hip-shootin', rip-snortin' son-of-a-gun from hell," roared Dave. "I can beat the head off any man dares step on the tail of me coat!"

"It is silly," insisted the Russian. "Come and have a bite with me, Davey. Maybe the Y Bar O will hire you back tomorrow."

"Hire me back?" whooped Dave. "I'd see them in hell first! I'm gonna pick this town clean, then I'm haulin' stakes. *Whoopee!*"

Tom Carter strolled around the corner. The little sheriff was barely five feet six. He wore an old vest over his soft black shirt, and his guns hung low. He was a mild, inoffensive little fellow.

The Count said, "Oh-oh! Now comes it!"

Dave whirled around, holding Coster's gun. At sight of Tom Carter, he hurled the weapon at Pashkow and said, "You can have this. I'm gonna duck Tom in the trough."

The sheriff drooped against the front of the Boston Café. He said, "Now, Dave, calm down and stop making all that racket. Moody'll be annoyed."

COB CHAFFEE was coming toward them now. At sight of the sheriff, Moody started hurrying down the street. Lafe Torrance, the tight-faced president of the bank, ran across to fat Dell Daily's General Store. The forces of Law and Order were gathering against Dave Gadd.

Dave roared, "Into the trough, you little squirt!"

He staggered forward, reaching his big hands to grab Carter. The sheriff did not seem to move, but he was not there when Dave arrived. He was two paces away and his right hand gun was drawn. Dave stumbled.

Carter stepped in, and the gun licked out, almost gently. The heavy muzzle clipped Dave behind the ear. He fell forward on his face.

"And Davey's such a nice boy!" said Pashkow mournfully. "It's plumb shameful!"

"Yep," nodded Carter. "It's a damned shame. I wish Dave'd grow up, one of these days."

"We should live so!" said Pashkow sadly. Cob Chaffee and the marshal came up. The Russian nodded gloomily to them and retreated inside the Boston Café. Except Tom Carter, the Count could not reconcile himself to the arms of the law. Some old trouble in Moscow had sent him to America years before, and the hatred had lingered on.

Jake Moody said, "I'll take him, Tom. He's always busting local ordinances."

Chaffee said, "Let's throw him in the cooler. He's a damned nuisance. This is the eighth time he's pulled that kid stunt."

Tom said coolly, "Shut up, Cob. Moody, you can rearrest him when I'm through with him—if you like the job."

Daily and Torrance came puttering over, the fat man and the lean one, representing the respectable citizenry of Grade.

"He should get a good jail sentence," sputtered Daily. "He's a public menace. Shotting out people's windows!"

Carter said coldly, "I'll be responsible for Dave. Give me a hand, Cob. And take it easy!"

Chaffee reluctantly obliged. Between them, they carted Dave to the modest cabin around the corner which was Tom Carter's bachelor home.

Count Pashkow stood in the doorway of the Boston Café and watched gloomily. He saw Bull Coster come around from the back and stare after the three men, then join Daily and Torrance.

The Count shook his head. There were many strange things going on in Grade, which he only half understood himself. It was, of course, none of his business. In Moscow, he had stuck out his neck, and look what had happened!

★

DAVE GADD groaned and opened his eyes. He had been sleeping for twenty hours, and now it was Sunday evening in Grade. Tom Carter held out a cup of black coffee, his freckled features impassive.

Dave gulped greedily and swore. "That's poison, Tom!"

Nevertheless, he sat up. He put his hands to his aching head and said, "I guess I threw another one, huh, Tom?"

"You didn't miss," said Tom.

Dave stretched his long arms. His broad face split into a ready grin. He said, "Well. I'm sorry. And I guess I'll just have to stay with you a while, Tom. I got fired again and I'm broke."

Tom nodded. "You're broke. And you're not fooling. You're staying here, all right!"

Dave shook his head. "I've caused you plenty trouble. I was only kidding. I'm riding Dopey out of here today. Thought I'd go down Texas way. New country—new start."

Tom said, "If you can't make good in your own town, you can't make good anywheres, Dave."

"I've worked for everybody here," said Dave. "I done worked out the territory. Seems like I always get into a fight."

"Yep," said Tom. "That's why I hired you."

"You? You got no job for me."

"You're a deputy sheriff," explained Tom gently. "I need another man. One-Card and Granny Oakes and the gang are getting tough. I ain't just satisfied with Cob Chaffee. He can't forget I beat him for sheriff. So I'm hiring you."

Dave said, "You're plumb crazy, Tom!" He reached into his vest pocket for the makings. His finger encountered something hard. It was a five-pointed star, pinned to his shirt. . . .

He rolled the cigarette carefully, staring down at the tin badge. After a moment he said, "Tom, they'll never let you get away with this."

"I'm the sheriff," said Carter steadily. "I hire my own men."

"Daily and Torrance and the others will. . . ."

"Daily called a meeting in his place. We're going over there now," said Tom. "I'm ready for them. Are you game?"

"Game?" said Dave. "Game? Hell, I ain't scared!"

The General Store contained everything in merchandise that Grade citizens might want to buy displayed in great disarray. Tonight, in addition, it contained the fat proprietor with his pig eyes and bald head. It also held Lafe Torrance from the Bank, with his sharp nose which always seemed to be sniffing something unsavory; Jake Moody, morose and drooping; Cob Chaffee, his heavy features sullen with jealousy.

Dave said happily, "Hiya, gents! Tom and me are ready to clean up Coquina County!"

The silence was sodden. Tom's quiet voice said, "Get it off your chests, men. I'm ready for your arguments. Dave is my new deputy, whether you like it or not—but I'll give you some answers."

Torrance said stiffly, "Gadd's a hoodlum—"

Daily cut in whiningly, "We can't expect protection from a wild coot like Gadd!"

"I want him on a local charge," boomed Marshal Moody indignantly. "He oughta be in jail."

Horses' hoofs clopped in the dirt of Grand Avenue. There was silence in the store. Tom Carter looked terribly small, but his face was grave and calm. Dave looked at him and a great feeling of tenderness swelled up inside the big puncher.

Dave had always been a tough character. As a small button he had been underfoot in Grade, an orphan and unwanted. He had kicked around among people until he could work, then he had taken to horse-wrangling, finally to riding herd. He had worked hard, played hard, lived hard.

From his rude beginnings had come his anti-social attitude. Full of fun, his only expression was to break things. He had never been taught better, mainly because almost no one could whip him.

Of course Tom Carter had whipped him. But for the sheriff Dave had always a great feeling of respect. Now, facing the ill-natured businessmen of Grade, Dave dimly sensed the true dignity, the simple courage of the little man.

Tom had had his troubles in Grade, too. There had been strong local pressure behind Cob Chaffee's campaign for Tom's job. The mine people, going on the record of Tom's career in office, had saved the day. But Daily and Torrance and others had been behind Chaffee.

Daily said, "You're not running this county to suit some of us, Carter. The governor will hear about this. . . ."

Abruptly from outside there came the sudden sound of shots. The cadence of them was measured, unlike the wild loosing of a drunken cowhand's Sunday night farewell to town. Tom's face hardened, he turned and started for the door. Dave followed instinctively.

From behind them, a voice said harshly, "Hands up! Make it quick!"

They whirled at the time-honored command. A masked man held a sawed-off shotgun, threatening them. Into the front entrance another figure stepped, bearing two six-shooters.

"That goes double! Everybody hold everything!"

★

TOM CARTER lifted his arms resignedly. Dave followed suit, and the others froze. There was no chance of resistance, Dave knew at once.

Over the bandit's shoulder, through the front window, Dave caught sight of a shadowy figure. It was Count Pashkow, and he was slinking down towards the bank. Dave stared, then returned his attention to the hold-up man in the front of the store.

A bandanna handkerchief hid the man's features, but Dave would know him anywhere. It was One-Card Charlie Gates, down from the outlaw hideout in the hills. There would be six or eight others with One-Card, going through the town. It was a real raid.

The man in the back said, "Unbuckle your belts. Step away from your guns."

Dave obeyed with the others. These bandits knew their business. The man in the back sounded like Granny Oakes, who had ten years of outlaw experience behind him and had served two sentences in Yuma prison.

Tom Carter was dropping his belt, the big Colts dangling uselessly. Jake looked hard and angry. Jake was game, even if he was dumb, Dave thought.

Daily and Cob Chaffee were pale, but did not seem scared. Old Man Torrance was frightened to death, but he was a town fellow, anyway, and knew *nothing* of violence. From outside there were more shots.

Oakes said calmly to One-Card, "I guess they cleaned the Boston, all right. The streets are clear."

One-Card said harshly. "We're gettin' outa here pronto. If you stick your heads out before we get clear, we'll blast out your brains!"

Tom Carter said, "See you later, One-Card."

The bandit snorted behind the handkerchief. "Like hell you will, Tom. This is a big haul. I'm pulling stakes."

"I'll see you," insisted Tom calmly.

One-Card laughed and walked backwards to the door. There was no sound from the rear. Dave stole a glance, and saw no sign of Granny Oakes. The old-time outlaw would have to pick up a horse to join the others, Dave reasoned. This was the difficult part for the gang. Holding up the town was a surprise maneuver, and easily accomplished. But getting away was another thing.

One-Card still covered them with his guns. But in order to get his horse, Granny must have retreated into the alley. Dave flexed his muscles carefully. When One-Card was about to mount—that would be the time.

One-Card stepped back upon the walk, but his gun-muzzles still menaced them. It would be suicide to make a play. Outside, four men rode up, leading riderless horses. Granny had not got around, yet.

There were sacks on the saddles of the bandits' horses. They had cleaned out the Boston, all right. There was heavy money in the Boston on Sunday after the big Saturday play. Dave edged a step out of range of One-Card's threatening weapons.

One-Card reached backward for the pommel of the saddle, and for that moment his aim wavered. Dave dropped, and his hand clawed for his six-shooter.

Tom Carter yelled, "No! Granny's still. . . ."

Dave grabbed the gun and fired a shot through the door. He could hear the others flopping down on the floor of the store, out of range. His bullet missed One-Card but dropped another man from his saddle into Grand Avenue's dirt. Granny's head popped suddenly through the door of the store.

Tom Carter threw his small body into the air as Granny's shotgun blast exploded from the doorway. Tom flipped over and went down, his face white and still.

Dave, untouched, fired at Oakes, who dropped the smoking shotgun and ran. Again he missed. He cursed, raving, standing up straight. He ran, leaping over Tom's body. A hail of lead from outlaw guns flew about him, but none hit him. He aimed carefully for a spot between the shoulders of a fleeing rider. His gun roared.

The man toppled, slipped to the ground. Jake Moody came running and stood beside Dave, pumping lead. One-Card turned in the saddle, firing his Winchester rifle.

Jake Moody said, "The dirty . . ." and fell, shot through the heart.

Then they were out of range, and Dave was running into the street towards the corral where Dopey was unsaddled and resting.

He'd made twenty paces before Pashkow appeared from nowhere and grabbed his arm. "No use, Davey! You got to stay. I saw it! Tom is down. Jake is down. You got to keep your head. You want that Cob Chaffee in full charge?"

Dave sobbed, "Tom saved me! I made a dumb play and he jumped in front of Granny's gun. I didn't think about them having Granny planted there by the door."

"I know . . . I know," said Pashkow soothingly. "Didn't I see it all? But you got to calm down. You got to take Tom's place. Tom knew Chaffee was no good, eh? That's why he made you deputy, is it not?"

Dave gulped. He clenched his hands until the nails bit into his callouses. He said, "Is that so, Count?"

"That is so," said Pashkow gravely.

Dave said dully, "I got to grow up, huh, Count?"

"Yes," said Pashkow. "Now, I think. Quick, you got to grow up."

CHAPTER TWO

"A Fight I've Got to Win!"

TOM CARTER lay on the cot in his own house as saturnine Doc Leander worked with deft hands. Outside the posse was forming, and Cob Chaffee's loud voice could be heard exhorting the men.

Dave said, "Jake Moody's dead, Doc. Has—has Tom got a chance?"

The lean medico said, "I don't know. The full blast didn't get him. But a man just can't take a charge of buck like that and have a good chance to live."

Dave said, "No, I suppose not." He stood up. "You'll stay with him, Doc? He's got nobody."

"I'll stay," said the doctor briefly.

Tom's features seemed even smaller. They were very white and pinched and Tom didn't breathe much under the bandaged. Dave tore his gaze away and went outside.

Lafe Torrance came staggering down the street. His hair was waving wildly and his long arms gesticulated. "The Bank!" he howled. "They got into the safe in the wall! They got all the money!"

Dave strode forward and grasped the banker roughly. "What's this all about?"

"The pay-roll for the mines," groaned Torrance. "I had a space built in the wall. The mines covered up the date of delivery of the specie—fifty thousand dollars! They went right to it and took it all!"

Dell Daily waddled over. "You had two thousand of my money in there," he wailed. "You said it was safe."

"And five thousand of mine," mourned Torrance, pulling at his hair frantically. "And God knows what from the Boston Café! You've got to catch them!"

"Cob'll get them," said Daily. "Cob's ready to start now. You'll be the next sheriff sure, if you bring back One-Card, Cob!"

Dave said, "My horse is at the corral. You go ahead. I'll catch you."

The men of Grade were booted, spurred and mounted. They were talking big, waving their weapons. But they were a poor lot of gamblers, hangers-on, miners and breeds, Dave thought. There were only three punchers in the lot. Cob had sworn them in hastily, picking his men from the volunteers, but Cob had done a bad job.

Daily squealed, "Get going! The trail will be cold! Hurry, Cob! Bring back our money!"

Cob let out a stentorian yell of command. The posse screamed back at him. A cloud of dust arose, horses cavorted, a half-drunken miner let off his six-shooter, and the posse scurried out of town in disorderly array.

Daily said, "Follow them, Gadd! You're a deputy! Go with them!"

Dave said, "Yeah."

He deliberately turned and went back into Tom Carter's house.

Doctor Leander said, "He's resting easy. But it's no use being too optimistic."

Dave said, "Yeah. I know."

He stood and watched for a long moment. Tom's freckles stood out like patches upon his white face. The small, brawny hands still lay helpless at Tom's side.

Dave said, "He took it for me. Can you imagine that? Jumped right in front of Granny's gun—just for me!"

He did not wait for the doctor's reply. He turned and walked out of the little cabin. He went past the general store, not looking at Dell Daily and Lafe Torrance who huddled there to mourn together. He went around to the corral in

back of the Grade House and got a rope on Dopey.

★

DOPEY was almost a palomino. He was bigger than the usual piebald cayuse, and down his back ran the brown streak of his ancestry. Dopey was a mixed breed. He had a spot around his left eye which gave him a comical expression of surprised stupidity.

But at the feel of the rope on him, Dopey came trotting patiently to his master. He stood quite still when Dave threw the saddle upon him. He endured the tightening of the cinch without budging a hair.

Dave threw his leg up and settled into the hull. Dopey immediately hung his head and bucked. For about thirty seconds Dopey sunfished, twisted and sidewheeled with Dave waving his hat and raking his long spurs. Then Dopey quit; the game was over, and the day—so far as he was concerned— had begun.

Dopey was the smartest, toughest animal in Coquina County, and everyone knew it, including Dopey himself. Dave had acquired him from the Y Bar O when Dopey was a motherless foal, and Dave had trained the quaint pony after his own humor. Dopey was full of tricks.

A man came panting around the corner of the corral. Dave said, "Easy, Dopey," and the horse stopped, turning an inquiring nose.

Pashkow ran to grab Dave's stirrup. "Davey!" he puffed. "Look, there is something maybe I should tell you. This Coster, he . . ."

A shot sounded from somewhere near. Dave's hat flew into the air. Blood appeared on Dave's face.

Pashkow groaned, "Davey! I'm too late, then . . . I was scared. . . ."

Feet pounded close as Dave slumped from Dopey's back. Two men ran from the back of the hotel. Pashkow, on the far side of the horse, reached out and grasped the pommel of Dave's saddle. Dave lay still on the ground.

Speaking softly in Russian, Pashkow put his right foot in the stirrup. Dopey pricked up an ear, hesitated. Pashkow hung his weight on his hand-grasp, on the one foot. Again he spoke softly, urgently in the foreign tongue.

Dopey broke into action. A man cursed and said, "Grab that damn' crazy pony! This has got to be done right!"

Pashkow hung almost invisibly as Dopey broke into a gallop and struck over the back lots, crossing a dim side street parallel to Grand Avenue.

One of the men raised a rifle.

Pashkow, still out of sight of the marksman, spoke again. Dopey broke sharply and trotted behind a building. The bullet sped harmlessly to the left.

Pashkow gave a tremendous heave. His skinny body canted upward and into the saddle. His hands were remarkably sure, gathering the trailing reins. Dopey, the pony nobody could ride, was docile as a lamb. Pashkow turned him due west. . . .

Back in town, the two men raised Dave Gadd roughly and carried him behind the hotel. Blood oozed from his scalp, and he seemed very dead. For a space of time the two men debated, and in that time Dave's sense reeled about, came to an uneven stop. His eyes opened, and he tried to arise.

To his tortured amazement he could not move a finger. He was fully conscious, but his nerve centers were paralyzed.

He heard a voice say, "If he's not dead, he'll die soon enough. We got to bury him some safe place, I tell you!"

The other man growled, "I'll make damn' sure he's dead. Where you want him planted?"

"Some place where nobody would look for a body—and where the coyotes can't dig him up."

That was nice, thought Dave. They were very good to him. No coyotes to gnaw at his corpse! He strove desperately to move his fingers. They would not respond.

It was funny, but his mind was working fine. If he could only get his muscles to behave, he would get up and smack these two murderers all over the lot.

The big man moved restlessly, and through half-closed lids Dave got a glimpse at him. It was Bull Coster.

The mine foreman, then, had tried to make good his threat. To all appearances, he had succeeded.

Dave lay very still, trying not to breathe, but still attempting to move some part of his body, just a trifle, to reassure himself that he was actually alive.

Nothing happened.

The second man chuckled. He said, "I know where nobody'll ever expect to find him. Down behind old Torrence's bank! That's the place!"

"There's a shed and some tools in the back lot," agreed Coster. "Maybe you ain't so wrong!"

The other fellow chuckled again. "Grab hold of him. I don't mind diggin' a grave. I got nothing else to do until things quiet down."

Coster came and seized Dave's shoulders. The other man picked up his feet. Dave slitted his eyes, squinting in the dark as they roughly trundled him down the back lots.

The second man was One-Card Gates!

★

THE sound of the shovel was stealthy, but to Dave's ears it was the thud of doom. Again and again he strained to move a muscle, but the bullet which had creased his skull had paralyzed him completely.

They had lugged him to a spot behind the shed at the rear of the bank. It was a starless night, with clouds scudding blackly overhead, promising a storm. Dave shuddered, thinking of a muddy grave, but his muscles remained numb.

Coster growled, "This feller would have been a nuisance. And with Carter out of it, we're pretty safe."

"Don't talk," advised One-Card. "Work!"

"Nobody ever comes this way," said Coster. "How come that damn' palomino to run off? I heard he never left this damn' Gadd."

"Don't worry so much," said One-Card.

The shovels went busily back to work; the dirt pile grew. Dave felt the sweat running on his chest. They had flopped him upon his back, with his arms sprawled. They certainly believed that he was dead.

The first scant drops of rain fell and Coster cursed savagely. One-Card said, "You're the damnedest worrier! Go on and dig!"

Perhaps it was the rain, perhaps the sight from the corner of his eye of the heaping pile of dirt. But Dave's little finger on his left hand moved!

Stones rattled over the top of the heap and ran down on Dave's right hand. He tried again. The hand came slowly back to tingling life, as if it had been asleep. He put forth every ounce of will power, making himself feel for his belt.

It was gone. They had stripped him of gun and cartridges. He let the hand drop back, realizing that he would be very weak, even if all his body should return to life in time.

The dirt pile was high enough to have come from a deep hole. Coster said, "The coyotes don't come in this close."

"Get some rubbish," said One-Card. "After we plant him we'll level off and and scatter stuff around. This has got to be good."

Coster clambered out of the hole and

lumbered off across the lot. Dave made another try. He found he could roll his body a bit.

The dirt pile was between him and One-Card. Dave rolled left, then right. His legs felt as though pins and needles were attacking them at every point, but —he could move!

If he could roll far enough, he thought, he might make the edge of the shed. The bank building was beyond. If he could gain Grand Avenue, he might attract the attention of a passerby. Anyhow, it was worth trying.

Something swished through the air and fell with a soft sound near Dave's left hand. He reached out weakly. His fingers touched the coiled loop of a reata. It was a new rope, and Dave's fingers eagerly sought the honda.

The rawhide was carefully bound and stitched. It felt a lot like Dave's own rope. He had a way of fitting the skin with the ends of the hemp tucked in neatly which was almost a trademark. He seized the rope with new hope.

One-Card said, "Hurry with that stuff, Coster. You're just like all miners—an old woman."

Coster swore vigorously. Dave lay quiet and thought it out. The corner of the shed to which the rope led was ten yards away. Coster and One-Card growled at each other and Dave spread the loop of the reata.

It was hard work getting it about his shoulders, but his strength was slowly returning. He drew the honda down and gathered all his slender strength. It was an awful effort to get his legs doubled under him. He took hold of the rope and pulled gently.

It became taut almost at once, then eased away. Dave took a deep breath. One-Card said, "About six inches more will do it. Get in here and dig! You've been loafing long enough."

The shovels went back to work.

DAVE hauled himself half-erect, setting a course towards the corner of the shed. The rope retreated. Dave made his legs move, one, two—one, two. They faltered, but they carried him. He staggered and almost fell. The rope went tight again, holding him up.

He muttered, "I get it now. . . ."

One-Card said, "All right. Pick up the big cow-nurse and toss him in. We shoulda left him this side of the heap. . . ."

Dave bent double and stumbled ahead. The rope staunchly hauled him on. He heard Coster yell in amazement and dismay. He tried to run. The edge of the wooden shack hit him a wallop in the shoulder and he spun around towards the street.

There was one shot. Then there was Dopey, and Dave said, "Down, horse! Get down!"

Dopey knelt. It was his best trick. Dave sprawled across the hull, and then Dopey got up. Dave plucked at the rope around his body and said, "Get going, horse! Out of here."

Dopey sprang like an arrow from the bow. In three jumps the pony was around the edge of the bank building and headed up Grand Avenue.

Dave whispered, "Atta boy, horse!" The Winchester was gone from its scabbard and he was without weapons, but life had begun anew—and the grave yawned emptily behind him.

The quickening breeze felt fine. A trickle of blood ran down his face, and he was weaker than a cat, but he could stay in the saddle. The few people down on Grand Avenue stared curiously at him, but there were no further shots from One-Card or Coster.

The palomino turned willingly into the street next to the Boston Café. There was a small light in Tom Carter's cabin and the door was ajar. Dave fell from Dopey's back and staggered forward.

Dopey stood for a moment, watching. Then he trotted around the building to the back, where he had stabled before, in the shed with Tom Carter's black horse.

Dave got over the doorsill, into the room. Doc Leander came to his feet and said, "Quiet—Oh, it's you!"

The rain suddenly increased in tempo, belting against the roof with terrific force. Dave gasped, "It's—wet—outside!"

He managed to sit in a chair, though, while the Doc cleaned his wound. It had begun to hurt, now. He sat there and stared at Tom, but Tom did not open his eyes.

Doc Leander said, "Tom's no worse, and no better. It will take a little time."

"I sure would like to ask him some things," muttered Dave thickly. "I sure would like to ask him about that hombre still being in town. And about the Count."

"Hold still," said the Doc sharply.

Dave scarcely felt the pain. His head had been hammered by the muzzle of Tom's gun and seared by the path of a bullet, so a little more pain would not count. He stared at Tom's white face.

This was a job he had to do himself. Tom's two guns were on the table. He could borrow one of them. He was not at all sure where he would start, but as soon as Doc Leander got through with his messing around, he would begin something.

One thing he could do—start a fight. He was good at starting fights. Only he vaguely knew that when he started this one, he had to be very sure to win, on account of Tom.

He was a deputy sheriff now.

CHAPTER THREE

Boothill Prospector

THE posse rode back into town after midnight, bedraggled and wet to the skin. They trooped into the Boston Café, talking loudly and vainly of what they would have done had not the rain destroyed the tracks of the outlaws.

Outside, astride Tom Carter's black horse, wrapped in a slicker and an old sombrero which covered his bandaged skull, Dave Gadd sat hunched and silent, listening. He heard Cob Chaffee's voice.

"They got into the hills and then they were gone. I could have cut their trail, all right, if it hadn't of poured."

"Headin' straight for the Border," nodded a flat-faced miner. "We'll never see them again. That money's gone!"

Lafe Torrance was very pale. Dell Daily wailed that he was ruined. The owner of the Boston Café, a colorless man named Dunn, seemed stunned by his heavy loss.

Chaffee seemed planted, whiskey glass in hand. There was no indication that he was going to attempt to report to Tom. Dave turned the black horse around and started down to the bank. He had a great curiosity about the hole which had almost been his grave.

He had not ridden Dopey because the palomino was too easy to recognize, even in the dark. He wanted very much to remain out of sight for the present. He wanted to see Coster and One-Card before they saw him. And he would also like to see Pashkow.

He rode over the muddy back lots and realized that it must have been the Russian who had thrown him the reata as he lay helpless.

Dave could not imagine how Pashkow had managed Dopey, but no one else could have known that he was the prisoner of One-Card and Coster except Pashkow.

Furthermore, the Count had tried to tell Dave something about Coster just before the bullet came along and ploughed through Dave's hard skull. The Russian had reason to hate Coster. Clearly in Dave's mind lingered the remembrance of Pashkow, Coster's gun in his possession, running past Daily's store with the

light shining on One-Card and his two guns. Pashkow could have taken a shot at One-Card with safety. But instead he'd run down towards the bank!

The Count was a mysterious character. Dave knew nothing about him except that he was a good card player and quite honest at the agmbling table. He seemed friendly to Dave, and to Tom Carter, as well, if that meant anything. And he had certainly thrown Dave that rope end.

It came back to the reata each time. Dave rode around the end of the bank building and dismounted. The hole had been hastily filled in. Coster and One-Card had strewn the rubbish about, and the mud had messed things up considerable. Dave poked with his toe at a piece of rusty tin.

The tin flopped over and something glinted dully. Dave stooped and picked up a revolver. It was a Colt .44, and it was well-oiled. There were two notches filed into the walnut butt. It was Coster's weapon.

He had thrown that gun to Pashkow. He remembered seeing the Russian pocket it. Come to think of it, Pashkow could have taken a couple of shots at One-Card and Coster, instead of letting Dave be towed out at the end of a rope.

Dave's brain began to boil a little under the heavy thinking. He went close to the shed and examined the ground to windward. There was a dry spot under the projecting eaves. By match light he distinguished the marks of Coster's miner's boots, One-Card's high heels, and the flat sign of Pashkow's city shoes.

Dave went back and stared at the freshly dug dirt over the place which was to have been his grave. It came to him forcibly that either Count Pashkow was buried thereunder—or else the Russian was with the outlaws.

Mechanically, Dave went to the shed for a shovel. He was still not up to top strength, but he was big and tough and the dirt had already been broken. He made the shovel fly for awhile.

He had gone almost to solid earth when his shovel edge struck something soft. Frantically he plied the tool. Kneeling, he dug with his hands, throwing out clods of dirt.

His fingers encountered the edge of a sack. He lifted. The thing came loose. It was not a part of Count Pashkow's body. It was a saddle-bag, and it was very heavy. . . .

HE CARRIED the bag behind the shed. He struck another light, twisting a piece of damp paper for a taper. There was money in the saddle bag—lots of money. It could only have come from the raid on One Card's gang.

A light appeared in the bank building. Dave saw Lafe Torrance through the window, his head on his chest, his face lined with worry. Shouldering the bag, Dave picked up the reins of the black horse and trudged to the rear door.

Lafe Torrance came wearily to answer the knock.

Dave stepped inside and said, "Pull down the shades."

The banker said, "What is it, Gadd? What have you got there?"

Dave said, "Your money, I think. How much did you lose, again?"

Torrance stared, goggle-eyed at the bag. Dave dropped it upon the table and turned out the wadded bills. There was a heap of loose silver and gold.

Dave said, "From the Boston Café. Some job straightening out who lost what in there! Now you had fifty-five thousand, didn't you? And Fatty Daily had two. Count it."

Torrance counted with trembling hands. After a moment he said, "Fifty thousand for the mines. Five thousand of my own cash. But where is Dell Daily's two thousand?"

"I wonder," said Dave softly. "Bull Coster knew of this deposit, didn't he?"

"I—I suppose so," said Torrance. "He's a trusted employee at the mines."

"Dell Daily called that meeting—to protest against my appointment as deputy," said Dave. "The hold-up was timed pretty good, wasn't it? Remember the way Oakes and One-Card appeared? Almost at the exact same second. Yet—Granny had to go through Daily's back room to get to where he stood us off!"

Torrance said, "I—think I begin to see."

"Daily's two thousand is out of the bag," said Dave. "He knew where your wall safe was hidden. Coster and Daily . . . . and One-Card is back in town already, hiding somewheres. They're supposed to split the money—but it was hidden in your back yard."

"I hope you don't think I had anything. . . ."

"No," said Dave grimly. "I was almost hidden there myself. But I know somebody else who is in on it. Look, Mr. Torrance, you go over to Tom Carter's. Take a gun and sit tight. If Tom wakes up, tell him all about it."

"What—what are you going to do?" asked Torrance.

"I'm going to prospect around," said Dave. "A man did me a favor. I got to look him up, and—thank him."

Torrance said, "I'll go. And I'll take this saddle-bag with me." He took a huge frontier model Colt out of a drawer of his desk.

His nose was sharper than ever, but there was a fierce glint in his eye. "They won't get it again while I'm alive. You—you've done fine work, recovering this, Gadd. I won't forget it."

Dave said, "Never mind that. Go to Tom and see nothing happens to him—or to the money."

He got on the black horse and followed the banker across the back lots until the lean man was safely headed for Tom's house. Then he rode back and tethered the mount to the rail before the Boston Café.

Across the street in Daily's store a night light burned. Dave stepped around to the side and took a look in the Boston before he started his plan.

Neither Cob Chaffee nor the Count were in the saloon. The erstwhile posse was whooping it up in celebration of what they would have done to the bandits if they had captured them.

Four shadowy figures rode down across Grand Avenue and around behind Dell Daily's house. There had been four riders left in One-Card's gang after Dave had done shooting at them.

Dave sighed and wished Jake Moody had not been killed, or that Tom Carter was up and around. This was beginning to look mighty tough.

Dave walked through the mud of Grand Avenue and up the steps of Dell Daily's store. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun when Dave hammered upon the door with his big fist.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Help Wanted!

THERE was silence within the general store for a moment. Then Dell Daily appeared at the door to the rear and came waddling forward. He saw Dave and paused. Dave shouldered the door, and to his surprise it gave.

The fat man said loudly, "What do you want, Gadd?"

"Just a look around," said Dave. He had loaded Coster's gun and stuck it in his waistband beside Tom Carter's weapon. He threw open the slicker and put a hand on each one.

He went on, "I'd like to talk to you and Cob Chaffee, and whoever else you got in that back room."

Daily wheezed, "You must be crazy, Gadd! You can't come in here and throw your weight around. I told Carter you were a drunken bully. . . ."

Dave said, "Walk backwards, Daily. You make a nice, wide shield."

A quiet, calm voice said, "Step aside, Daily. I got him."

Dave would never have believed Daily could move that fast. The fat man flung sideways and rolled before Dave could draw either gun. One-Card Gates stood in the doorway, his six-shooters leveled!

One-Card fired, but Dave was going sideways and the bullet tore through his slicker.

At that, One-Card should have had him. Dave did not understand why the bandit fell forward on his face without a sound. Dave just jumped forward, over the prone man, into that back room.

He almost collided with Count Pashkow. The Russian had a fixed grin on his face and a long, pointed foreign-looking knife in his hand. The blade dripped red, and then Dave knew what happened to One-Card.

The Count said, "Shoot fast, Davey!"

Granny Oakes was bringing up the shotgun. Dave took Granny first, firing careful, a little low. Granny doubled over like a tied sack.

Dell Daily's room seemed full of people. Coster was trying to throw something. Dave remembered that he had Coster's gun in his left hand. He pulled the trigger.

Coster fell in front of one of the four riders who had come in a little while before.

Pashkow had gone into the store, leaving Davey alone against four guns. He threw down on the nearest man, clipping a bullet into his middle. He bawled, "Throw 'em up! You're under arrest!"

To his amazement, the three remaining badmen dropped their guns and elevated their hands, their faces white with fear.

They kept staring at the dead men on the floor, and then their eyes slid back to Dave. One of them whispered, "All right, Dave. We quit." Dave recognized Manuel Ortiz, the Mexican outlaw.

Dave said, "Line up and unbuckle those belts!"

Then he realized the side door was open and that Cob Chaffee was missing. He snapped, "Drop those belts!"

A shot came through the glass in front. Pashkow reappeared, his hair wild and his blonde mustache bristling. He said, "I took care of Daily, no? He is tied up. I only cut him a little bit."

Dave said, "What's all that shooting outside about?"

"Chaffee," said Pashkow. "He is telling the mob that he has One-Card bottled in here, no? You had better show yourself, eh, Davey? Then they will know the truth."

"Yeah," said Dave bitterly. "Show myself, and Chaffee will cut me down and swear I was one of them. His miners and riff-raff'll kill these hombres and put us all in the pot as crooks. He's a smart fella, that Chaffee."

The bandits looked even more frightened. Dave said sourly, "I got yellow hold-up men and a crooked Russian, and the whole town will be cutting lead through here. If this ain't a hell of a finish!"

Pashkow said with dignity, "I saved your life twice."

"Why?" asked Dave curiously as he reloaded his guns, examining the weapons of the bandits with a view to laying down a barrage. "You were in on it. You were the outside man for them, weren't you? You helped them bury the stuff. You and Coster and One-Card were going to cross the others."

"I deny it," said Pashkow firmly.

Dave shrugged. He said, "It looks like you won't live to do anything about it. But I'm curious. Why?"

More shots came through the store windows. Dell Daily screamed once, then was still.

Pashkow said, "They got Daily, eh? You ask me why, Davey? I tell you. Coster was a brute, no? One-Card—he was brave. The Granny, he was fierce. The others? Cattle! I was a Cossack, Davey. Scruples, maybe, I have few. But bravery—that is what I like. You and Carter are brave men. I show you, now. I show you the Cossack!"

He made a sudden leap.

HE WAS into the store, in full view of Chaffee and his mob. Dave followed unthinkingly, his guns ready. The three bandits on the floor slithered immediately out the side door of the building and were gone for their horses as the first of the mob came around the back.

The dagger in Pashkow's hand was his only weapon. Dave saw Chaffee raise a gun and aim deliberately at the Russian. Pashkow ducked behind a plow which Daily had on display.

Chaffee fired; Dave fired. Pashkow leaped off the porch at Chaffee.

Chaffee fell down. He tried to get up, tried to raise his six-gun. Dave calmly fired again, as Pashkow piled down among the crowd, wielding his long knife.

The mob, leaderless, unknowing which way to turn, banged away. Dave followed Pashkow's late example, gaining shelter behind the plow.

The voice which cut through the noise came from behind them, from in front of the Boston Café. Dave peeped cautiously. He caught a glimpse of Tom Carter! Then he was on his feet, yelling.

Tom was standing braced against the wall of the Boston Café, his bad shoulder leaning upon Lafe Torrance. The banker held a rifle. Tom had his long six-shooter in his good hand.

Tom's voice commanded, "Stop firing!"

The shooting ceased as though a string had been pulled. Men faced around, staring at Tom. In one second the mob had found a new leader.

Tom said coolly, evenly, "Dave! Have you got them all?"

Dave came into view, hatless, the bandage disarranged on his head, a revolver in each hand. He stepped down behind Count Pashkow, who was struggling in the arms of two big miners. He said, "Turn my friend loose, you fools!"

He grabbed the Count's arm and steered him through the wondering crowd. He called, "Me and my partner, here, have about cleaned them up. Except three who got away when this fool gang began shooting."

Tom said, "Well?"

"I just got to get my horse," said Dave. "I got to get a posse together and go get those three."

He came up to Tom. Doc Leander ran to them and said, "Sheriff, you've got to get back in bed!"

"Sure," said Tom. He stared at Pashkow, then his glance returned to Dave. He said, "I see you have grown up considerable, Dave."

Dave stepped close and whispered, "He's all right, Tom. He—I couldn't have done anything without him. I'd of been killed—and buried by now."

Tom repeated, "You've grown up. The brave just don't care, do they, Dave?"

Pashkow was untying the black. He looked at Tom and said, "I may borrow him? I ride with Davey."

"Yeah," said Carter. "Take him. It's all right."

Pashkow bowed ceremoniously. Dave ran for the shed where Dopey waited. It was going to be a fight, when Ortiz and the others hit their hideout and re-armed. A tough, deadly battle in the hills.

But he hadn't grown up enough not to look forward to a good fight!

THE END

★ FIRST AID FROM

Gripping Renegade Novel

By Stone Cody

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Friend Wanted!

McVEY pulled up in the deep shadow of a cottonwood a hundred yards from the house. His horse stood wide-legged, swaying, his wind-broken breath coming as loudly as the exhaust of a steam locomotive. The sound of it on the quiet night air sent a small chill down McVey's spine. He

THE OWLHOOT ★ ★

The sharp report of his gun seemed to tear the night apart. . . .

Jim McVey, outlaw on the dodge, got the break that comes to one man in a million when he realized that he could not only get rich by grabbing off those two ranches, but could also attain the respect of honest men he'd always wanted. Why, then, did he choose to ride back to the men who'd branded him coward, and share with them a bloody, bitter death?

couldn't quite believe that it wouldn't bring the whole ranch crew swarming out on him.

Light shone from the windows of

the bunkhouse and those of the main ranch. But all the sounds were muted; murmurs of voices behind the closed bunkhouse door, the soft thud of hoofs in the corral, the chink of crockery and pans from the kitchen of the house.

McVey dismounted and loosened the cinches of his saddle. He was starting to pull it quietly off the sorrel's back when he heard the sound he had been listening for—the muffled run of hoofs, like a pulse in the night air.

He stiffened, losing precious seconds to be sure. There was no doubt of it now. It was the sheriff's posse, and they were coming fast!

He could risk the rush to the corral for a fresh horse, or take out on foot for the brush and the hills. That last might be smarter, but he had the cowpuncher's instinctive dread of walking. He jerked the saddle free and then snatched off the bridle.

Inside the house and bunkhouse nobody seemed to hear the increasing beat of the running hoofs. To McVey they sounded like near thunder. Damn Sheriff Ike Sutter anyhow! Nobody else would have driven trail-tired horses that fast when it was too dark to read sign. McVey had hoped for at least an hour's start on a fresh horse—providing he wasn't discovered while he was snaking one out of the corral.

He heaved the saddle to his shoulder and started, moving fast and soft. He'd have to risk crossing the light lanes from the windows. If anybody challenged him, it meant either giving up or shooting some poor devil he didn't know and didn't carry any grudge against. The old timer, for instance, whom he had met today.

The idea gave him a thin smile in the darkness. The old-timer owed his life to McVey. Maybe this would be the time for him to collect. . . .

It had been earlier that day, with McVey's sorrel already overtired. The old puncher, whose name had turned out to be Rawhide Jones, had been chasing a tough, fast, mean longhorn. The steer, roped, had pulled Rawhide's cowpony over and had been on the point of finishing his rider when McVey jumped his exhausted sorrel into action. He swung his rope and laid a loop and then a hoof twist onto the steer.

A girl had come up before he left—a girl with a determined yet soft mouth, and shining blue eyes. McVey remembered her now with a curious, obscure regret. . . .

He was at the first lane of lamplight now. He swung closer to the house, crouching, and crossed it fast. Beyond the rise the hoof-thud of the posse sounded louder. Too loud.

He began to run toward the corral. He was trying to run softly but the pound of his feet and the scuff of his boot heels sounded as loud to him as the posse. And the leather of his saddle seemed to creak as loud as a rusty windmill. Cold sweat came out on his forehead.

The feel of it put an anger in him and he straightened suddenly and began to walk toward the corral as though he owned it. That was the best way anyhow.

He got to the corral just as the posse hammered over the rise and slammed down toward the glow of the ranch house lights. His first hurried throw missed and then his second, because the horses were already milling, spooked no doubt by his own strange scent and by the sound of racing hoofs on the night air.

Somebody in the bunkhouse called, "What's that?" and a man stepped out into the yard from the doorway with two more following. Jim McVey huddled down by the corral bars. He left his saddle and bridle there and backed, crouching, along the circular fence until he had it between him and the bunkhouse. Then he began to crawl, belly down, toward the other side of the house.

MEN were boiling out of the bunkhouse now, and other figures were running from the main house. An age-bent man that looked familiar came out of the house just as McVey slid through the shadows toward the back. A silhouetted, scrawny head turned in his direction as he moved. McVey stopped, tense and holding his breath. But the man moved on, and McVey cautiously continued toward the cottonwood which sheltered his horse. Then the posse came into the yard.

From the ranch house a voice asked curtly, "Well, gents, what's your pleasure? You ride like you was in a hurry."

Ike Sutter's voice came quickly. "Tryin' to put our brand on a maverick, friend. You seen one ride by here?"

"Haven't seen any stranger ride through here," the other voice said. "Nobody but our own crew around so far as I know."

That was not the oldster's voice. There was a steady sureness, an authority, in it. This must be the boss of the ranch.

Sutter was quiet for a moment, then he said slowly. "He's somewhere around. Phil, here, got a look at him through binoculars about five miles back. This feller was ridin' a hoss that staggered when he tried to get goin', an' run-weavin' an' stumblin' when he did git goin'."

"From what you say, it seems to me like he must have give out before he got here."

The sheriff tugged at his graying longhorn mustache. "Mister," he said, "if it was almost any other hombre I'd put down my bet alongside your'n. Only, this gent knows horses. He won the race from Tuscon to Santa Fe last year. Another man would have bogged down two miles up the trail. But this'n would have got to here, or even further."

The rancher's answer was curt. "Then he got further. Or he run off to the side. Good-night, gents."

McVey caught his breath. Something in Sutter's manner must have offended the rancher. And that meant that he still had a chance.

Sutter's voice came out grimly. "We'll just take a look-see around."

"You're kind of off the reservation, ain't you?" the rancher answered.

"We followed him through the Bitters and the Firetops, down to here," Sutter returned grimly. "Mebbe we're off our range an' should git aholt of the local law. But we'll be glad to do that, if we take him."

The rancher snapped, "Help yourself, but make it short an' sweet."

"We won't bother you long," Ike said stiffly. "Boys, fan out an' see what you can find."

McVey caught his breath and began to crawl slowly toward the shadow of the cottonwood.

The kitchen door opened suddenly and a familiar, wizened form stepped out. It was the old timer, Rawhide Jones, again. He stood looking through the shadows a moment, then he turned and walked toward the corral. McVey decided that the old man hadn't seen him, and he started his laborious crawl. But he should have stayed still.

One of Sutter's men yelped. "Hey! Look at that white-stockin' sorrel under that cottonwood!"

Another burst out, "It's his, boys. An' he's got to be somewhere aroun'!"

"Line him up—and don't miss him!" That was Ike Sutter's voice.

Where McVey lay, the ground made a shallow depression, and he rested there, his nerves taut, his palm sweat-damp on his drawn gun-butt, his heart hammering against his ribs.

Always in him there had been hope, a blind but unswerving faith in the off, desperate chance of survival. This, however, was something else again. This was it—the end, the finish. This was a time to taste

his last moments. And he did that, almost gladly. There was the heavy feel of the gun in his hand, as he lay there in the dust, and the scent of palo verde drifting to him on the night air. The dim yellow blossoms made a strange subdued brightness in the dark. And from the corrals, the muffled sound of hoofs came sharper and more excited now, the scent of sweat-cooled hide stronger.

All these—the normal sights, sounds and smells of a ranch house at night were now his to sense for the last time. . . .

★

HE PULLED his Colt up and flicked its muzzle toward the rider nearest him—the one that in a dozen paces would come on him. For an instant he felt the surging temptation to drive his bullet dead-center and solid; to take one hunter with him over the Great Divide.

But some part of him rebelled at that. To them he was a hunted man, a criminal, certainly. But—more importantly—to himself he could never shoot a man in the back; could never strike down a man to his death without warning. He lifted his gun muzzle, aiming for the crown of the rider's hat, dim against the stars.

The sharp, blasting report of the gun seemed to tear the night apart. The high-crowned Stetson sailed from the rider's head as his startled mount jumped.

To the right a horse reared and a rider swore. To the left a posseman grunted as though he had been hit and then blasted wildly toward McVey's slight shelter. And the hatless rider's horse whirled and stampeded.

McVey slammed another slug toward the posseman who had shot at him, heard the lead chunk into flesh, and saw the horse go down plunging.

Other guns at the right began to fire, and behind him a Colt blasted close, the bullet slamming into the dust beside him. He twisted and saw a dismounted figure there, crouching. This posseman shot again and missed again as McVey turned toward him, and in the same instant another figure appeared beside him.

McVey shot three time fast, and saw the first figure go down.

The other dodged back behind the corner of the house.

McVey sprang up fast and lunged in that direction, shots from the riders in front slapping around him. As he ran, the man popped out from the corner of the house, and both guns blasted.

McVey felt the hammer of lead at his side, whirling him almost off balance. And he saw the other figure go down.

He caught himself and raced around the side of the house. The sight of the first dismounted figure had told him that there must be a riderless horse in front, and now he knew there were two of them. He had a chance—an off-chance—to hit the saddle and get away in the dark.

He ran, staggering, breathless and dizzy from the shock of the slug he had taken, his gun held wavering in front of him.

A bow-legged figure loomed menacingly in the lamplight thrown by the porch door. McVey pulled his gun up and fired blindly as a girl's figure ran out of the door and cried, "No! No!"

McVey ran toward the bowlegged figure, holding his fire for two staggering paces. And then his gun clicked on an empty shell.

As though the kick of the Colt was something he had been pressing against, expecting resistance where none came, he stumbled and fell face downward in the dust.

"Git him in!" the bowlegged man snapped in a hoarse undertone. And the puncher jumped into the saddle of a waiting horse.

The girl took one step toward McVey, who was trying to get up again, and then

she whirled. A sixgun glinted in her hand and blasted. The lamp in the hallway crashed in a tinkle of glass and there was darkness, as the bowlegged oldster hammered away on the racing horse.

The girl took two paces to where McVey was struggling against his weakness. Her booted foot came up and whipped down on top of his head, slamming his face into the dust.

A rider boiled around the corner of the house and yelled, "Yonder he goes! Get him now!" His gun spurted stabs of flame at the racing hunched-over figure on the galloping horse.

Suddenly the yard, back and front, was a hot confusion of pounding hoofs; of shouts, hammering guns and whirling dust. Then there was only stunned silence as the hoofbeats and the shots receded.

The girl took her foot off McVey's neck.

"You can get up now," she said shakily.

McVey took his mouth out of the dust and drew an agonized breath. "That's your idea," he said thickly, and then a flooding darkness swept him into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

Life Or Death!

HE WOKE up in a room on a bed that had sheets on it. The feel of them was so unfamiliar that he wasn't quite sure what they were at first. He only knew they felt slick and kind of uncomfortable.

A man and a girl were standing by the bed. The girl was the blue-eyed one he had seen that day. The man, rather heavy, and with a drooping gray mustache, was someone he hadn't seen.

McVey studied him, noticing not until now that the firm mouth had a curious gentleness about it which was easy to miss under the shadow of the mustache. Yet he had the jaw of a man who had never doubted he was right, and the direct, fierce eyes of one to whom fear was almost unknown. Easy enough to miss the solid, gentle curve of the mouth.

McVey didn't miss that, but his first thought was that this quiet, gray-mustached, gray-haired man was dangerous.

It was characteristic that he should see that first. Just as it was characteristic of him that he did not speak until he had taken in this whole scene and had remembered all that preceded it.

"Will the old timer get loose from them?" he asked.

The gray man nodded. "If anybody can."

He paused and there was an unwilling light of appreciation in his eyes. "He'll make it, he added, "and be back here before dawn.

"Did I kill anybody?" McVey asked.

The gray eyes were quick and serious on his. "Nobody. One hombre got it in the thigh and another in the shoulder. They're in the bunkhouse. Don't know you're here."

McVey said slowly, "Glad it turned out that way." And after a moment, he looked at the gray man and asked, "How come you played on my side?"

The square shoulders shrugged. "It was Rawhide's play," the even voice said with a hint of grimness. "Rawhide's one of my men."

McVey lay considering that, and it made him want to laugh a little bit. But he understood. Rawhide was one of his men. And Rawhide had a debt to pay. So....

McVey's eyes on the older man were understanding, and also sceptical. Even cynical.

The gray eyes held his unwaveringly, probing. And after a little McVey shifted his gaze to the girl.

She was staring at him with another

kind of look. There was doubt and puzzlement in it. And something else that he could not read.

He grinned suddenly. "Lady," he murmured, "you're the only woman that ever made me eat dirt and like it."

She smiled, almost unwillingly. "You're kind of hard, mister," she said. "Most men hit as hard as you were wouldn't even have tried to get up. That bullet cracked two of your ribs in four places, but it went on out. The wound's deep though, and bad. You'll have to lie quiet."

He said, and suddenly meaning it, "I'm sorry I have to be a trouble."

"No trouble," she answered a little stiffly.

He became aware of the gray eyes shifting fully between them.

He turned back to the man, obviously her father. "Obliged," he murmured.

The gray man nodded. "Good thing you were fast—and tough," he said. "But I don't reckon you're quite as tough as you think you are. You'd better sleep now."

He went out, the girl following him and saying, "Good-night." Her voice would have been indifferent if it had not been somehow so careful.

It was ten days before he could be up, and it would be longer than that, according to the guess of the rancher, Lee Boardman, before he could try to ride.

As Boardman had predicted, Rawhide Jones got back before dawn of that first day. And after several days, the posse came back too, having given up cutting for sign. McVey could hear Sheriff Sutter's sharply suspicious voice, pointing out that it was damn' funny that the trail had been lost so close to here, and the stolen horse not found.

Then there was a curious giving in in his suddenly lowered voice as a low, curt tone replied to him. McVey knew, smiling a little grimly, that Sutter had encountered those fearless gray eyes and had not wanted to go on.

He guessed that it would be a long time before Sutter figured out just what had happened to him inside to make him back up suddenly and ride off, ill at ease.

"Not sure I could face down that old hellion myself," he muttered. But he knew that that comment was inadequate.

And he found himself riled, as though somehow he himself had been faced down.

★

THE ten days in bed shortened to six, because his own restlessness would not permit him more. After that, he moved to the bunkhouse. Ike Sutter's men had gotten better and moved on.

McVey's welcome in the bunkhouse was anything but warm. Even Rawhide Jones treated him with reserve. The others were silently suspicious, or even hostile. When he came in from outside, talk had a way of falling off into silence and then picking up again with constraint in it.

That didn't bother McVey; it gave him a kind of faint amusement. And he was glad to be out of the main house. For there, Margaret Boardman did bother him.

It was not because she refused to unbend to him. That in itself was a little surprising. It is hard to tend a man night and day, bring him his meals, dress his wounds, wash and shave him, without letting any note of casual familiarity or friendliness creep into the relationship. It was a lesson to him, and an irritating one, in how a woman can remain impersonal and neutral when she chooses.

What bothered him was that she was not a neutral person. She was vivid and intensely alive.

He could hardly look at her as a man looks at a woman. In his place he couldn't think of marriage, and with her, no other kind of thinking would do. . . . No, inside the house wasn't any place for a man to have peace of mind.

The bunkhouse was better. He could guess what the hands were thinking and it didn't take him long to confirm his guess.

"I aint' sayin' he's either this or that," Rawhide grumbled impatiently. "What I say is, give the hombre a chance to show what he is. There's more than one good man got himself crosswise of the law before now."

McVey, walking in from the corral to the bunkhouse heard that, and grinned a little.

"Good man!" Rio snorted. "This kid's pure bronc. Look at them yaller-colored eyes of his'n, set wide an' a shade too wide open. I tell yuh, it don't never fail."

Rawhide grunted. "I knowed a little runt with no chin a-tall an' squint eyes like a packrat a-gazin' into the sun, an' I seen him whale the tar out of a hombre that figgered himself plenty tough. Then, four days later, the runt, havin' stayed drunk four times longer'n ten big men, come up with a hangover an' rid out of town an' got hisself drownded a-tryin' to rescue a passel of dumb nesters that got theirself caught in a flash flood. You cain't tell nothin' from how a gent looks."

"All that don't mean deuce, trey or seven to Rio," Slats Gerraghty put in, in the solemn tone he used for rawhiding. "Rio, he's a born jedge of beauty. Ef'n a man's eyes ain't jest so, why Rio, he'll disqualify him quicker'n a grub-line rider'll wolf a side of beef."

But Rio wasn't being hoorawed. "The Old Man looks out for us," he said doggedly, "an' me, I'm tryin' to look out for him. We been crowded by Jake Helmholz for more'n a year. An' now, on top of bein' broke, we're bein' rustled. How do I know this gent that calls hisself Jim McVey ain't connected up with it? An' if he ain't today, I don't trust him tomorrow, if somebody makes him a proposition. If I was the Old Man, I'd send him on his way pronto. He's plenty well enough to ride now."

McVey smiled, hard-eyed and cat-footed back to the corral. Later, he walked in whistling, wide-eyed and innocent.

What he learned then was plenty, but in other ways, purposeful and accidental, he picked up more, until the picture was pretty clear to him.

Lee Boardman, owner of the BB outfit, had only one weakness, but it was a big one and it looked as though it might be a fatal one. That was, he was loyal. It was a kind of foolishness that you wouldn't look for in that strong a man. He was loyal to the old days, the old ways and chiefly to the old men.

He wouldn't fire the stove-up, creaky-joint punchers who made a stab at working his spread, because they had worked for him in the early times. And he still ran longhorns because, he said, they would do better on this thin range than Herefords would—though the real reason was that he liked lognhorns and knew that his men liked and understood them.

McVey grinned wryly. Herefords would be better than longhorns, but Herefords weren't the answer. Young hands and fewer would help, but they weren't the whole answer, either. The real trouble was with the range.

Winter and summer, it wouldn't graze

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enough cows to do much good. A careful manager might make a go of it, but only for a comparatively small herd. It was not a spread to answer the needs of a man who thought of cattle and money in the terms that Lee Boardman was evidently used to.

He found out, after while, that Boardman had once owned a big spread to the south. He had lost it for reasons that McVey could only guess at. No doubt then he had lived high wide and handsome. He had used his money freely and had stuck by his friends. He hadn't had to stop and count the cost. And now he was too old to do so. After all those years, a man doesn't change that much.

What the spread needed, of course, was to double its present range, or else acquire a summer range. Thinking that, McVey's eyes narrowed. He looked out at the high green and purple lift of the Thunderheads rising beyond the sere tumult the malpais. There'd be summer range there, all right.

But by the time a man drove cattle through that thirsty hell of the badlands, they'd either be dead of thirst or so gaunted that the summer graze wouldn't help to put tallow on them.

He shrugged. It was no skin off his nose. He was obligated here, but not too deeply. He had saved a life and had had that debt paid back. And to boot, he had been offered a grudging hospitality for the sake of the man whose life he had saved. It pretty nearly broke even. He was free to ride out when he wanted to. Wherever he wanted to. . . .

But there was another point involved. Say that everything was even. Then what was to prevent his making what profit he could out of things, just as though these people were strangers? They expected him to do the best he could for himself. They trusted him about as much as they would a rattlesnake. What was to hold him back?

HE WONDERED if it was his own old bunch that was rustling the BB. He had ridden this trail because the outfit's hideout was near here. He didn't know just where, because they hadn't trusted him with that information. He hadn't ridden with them very long.

But whether it was his own gang or not, there ought to be some way for him to play into his own hand. It only needed a little looking about. Where things were about to blow up, there was a chance to a smart man to pick up some of the pieces. And those pieces, if he played his hand shrewdly enough, would go far toward building a stake for himself.

He thought about that, sitting in the shade of the porch, looking out over the flat, sere expanse of this range, feeling the harsh raw beauty of its sunsets and dawns and noon times flow into him; learning, for lack of other things to see, the twist of the weathered corral bars and the shape of the cottonwoods that shadowed the ranch house and the uneven, distorted outthrust of the palo verde.

And as he thought and rested, he could feel the strength flow back into him slowly, as the spring sap flows into trees.

He hadn't made his mind up yet, when Jake Helmholz came. But that wasn't the name McVey had known him under. . . .

McVey was in the kitchen, chatting with Charley the cook, when Helmholz came in. It was near noon and the hoofbeats might have been those of two of the ranch riders coming in for chow—only they weren't. McVey knew that as well as the old cook did—knew, without ever having been conscious knowing, the hoof action of every horse in the corral.

Charley left off peeling his spuds and cocked his ears. "Visitors," he murmured, in his precise English accent. "Captain Helmholz and his foreman, Leslie Thurber."

McVey got up, the movements of his

mended body already swift and catlike in its smooth unhurrying speed.

Old Charley blinked at him, but if he thought that McVey had recovered more completely than he had pretended, he did not say so, and nothing showed on his bland, childlike face.

Charley was what they called in his native country "a gentleman's gentleman." The younger son of a noble English family, whom he had followed to the West, had gotten onto the wrong end of a gunfight in the early days but Charley had stayed on, employing his versatile talents as a cook. He was past sixty now. He walked on his heels with his toes turned out. His smooth, expressionless face was splotched red from the liquor which was his only apparent weakness. McVey, smiling thinly, knew that he would preserve his discretion at all costs.

Outside he could hear voices from the front of the house and recognized Lee Boardman's curt, level tones. Then, as he neared the corner of the house, a new voice cut in, louder and more audible.

"You're a stubborn cuss, Lee. I'm makin' you as good an offer as you'll ever get. You're goin' broke here, an' you know it. With my spread an' yourn,' I could make an easy go of it. But alone, you can't."

McVey stepped around the corner then. He had faltered halfway in his step at the sound of that voice but then he had not quite been able to believe his ears. The momentum of his walk carried him on.

He stopped at the corner, freezing, every nerve in him taut and then jumping wildly. He stopped the movement of his hand towards his gun belt before it started, before even a muscle flicked in his finger. Because there was no gun there.

The big man stood before him. His face froze, too, the pallid blue of his eyes narrowing. And the fingers of his right hand jerked almost imperceptibly before they stilled.

That slight, almost unnoticeable movement was enough for McVey. He knew then exactly how things stood.

All this had happened in one fast second, and now the big man turned back to Lee Boardman. "Who's this?" he demanded suspiciously. "Mebbe you have got another offer, after all?"

Jim McVey's eyes had a flicker of appreciation. This big rancher man who called himself Jake Helmholz—and whom McVey had known as the outlaw leader, Red Jack Braden—was smooth, quick-thinking hombre. If anything could erase the effect of that tense second from Lee Boardman's mind, it would be what Helmholz had said.

But he was to find after Helmholz had ridden away that his quick words had not been altogether successful.

Lee Boardman's glance flicked over him veiled, but curiously hard. His daughter's straight blue eyes seemed to hold a kind of unwilling, puzzled confirmation of suspicion. Only Rio's eyes were sure.

Rio had known in the beginning. He knew all the more now. And what he had to say for Jim McVey was the grim deadly hardness of a man who knows his enemy and knows exactly what to do about him.

"McVey!" His voice lifted, challenging and dangerous. "You—"

"That'll do, Rio!" Boardman's voice was sharp and quick. "I won't be needin' you any further now!"

His foreman looked very much like a stubborn man who has been hit on the head with a club. He hesitated, swallowed, and then walked toward the bunkhouse, the very set of his backbone outraged and furious.

Lee Boardman turned on his heel and walked into the house. He had no look or word for McVey.

And that, to all appearances was the end of that incident.

But Jim McVey knew that it wasn't. He knew that it wasn't the end of it here on the ranch, and he knew that it wasn't the end of it for him, no matter where he rode. He had caught the motion of Jake Helmholz's finger as he left, knew that it was a signal for him to follow—that Jake Helmholz wanted to talk to him.

He went into the ranch living room and found Lee Boardman sitting behind the desk which served him for an office.

"I'd like to ride out a little, if I could have a horse," he said stiffly.

Boardman's face remained without expression. "Take anything you want," he said curtly.

McVey went to the bunkhouse and got out one of his guns. He cleaned it carefully and loaded it, under the intent, hostile gaze of the hands. Then he slid it into his belt under his shirt and pulled on an elkskin jacket that covered the bulk of the gun. He went out then and roped a horse.

From an upper window of the ranch house, he had a gimpse of Leila Boardman's watching face as he rode out.

He frowned a little, thinking that her face looked oddly white and strained, but then he put that down to the dim light of the shadowed window and rode on. There was a good deal more to think about than how a girl's face looked in a shadowed window.

He wondered bitterly if he was being a fool. But he knew that he couldn't be otherwise than a fool in such circumstances.

Helmholz' gesture had been the kind of gesture he couldn't avoid answering. And the sooner he answered, the safer he would be, because the masquerading outlaw would have less time to set his trap. Besides, it wasn't possible to build everything on that single flicker of the muscles of the gunhand. Either Braden meant to kill him or he didn't. He had to know that, finally and at once. And this was the way to find out.

He knew the direction of Jake Helmholz's ranch and the trail was plain tonight. He hardly needed the imprint of the fresh tracks to lead him. And for a time he rode almost at ease. The range was flat. It was possible, he realized, that some hidden arroyo might hold a drygulcher.

He rode with his nerves keyed to concert pitch. It seemed to him that his nostrils sensed and evaluated every odor on the air, sorted and weighed every mote of dust that floated on the breeze. For this run was for life or death. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Prisoner

HE RODE up a bare grassy slope toward a clump of mesquite and octillo with his eye cocked warily. It was a good enough place for an ambush.

He slowed, going toward the rise, his eeys wary, his flesh and nerves feeling naked because there was no cover except the short sparse range grass. Fifteen yards away he checked abruptly, the senses of warning pounding like the insistence of signal drums. He had to pull quick and wide of this danger. But even as he checked, the shot came.

The thin, wicked crack of the rifle was almost one with the vicious smacking of the bullet past his ear. And the shot had come from the right and behind him!

Only there was another element. The shot had come from behind, and it was only one shot. But there were two men—Jake Helmholz and his foreman.

Instinctively, then, he bolted from the saddle and darted diagonally toward the brush, with his horse between him and the rifleman.

The second rifle shot caught him three feet from the brush, whipped a spurt of dust inches from his foot. It was good

shooting, under the belly of his horse. He ploughed blindly through the brush, lunged forward against the stiff branches of an ocotillo and then eased backward, catlike, toward the margin.

Helmholz's narrow-eyed face showed for a fleeting second, and his sixgun blasted, kicking leaves and twigs in the spot where Jim's forward lunge had taken him.

The shot was two feet ahead of where McVey now lay. And the next time the gun hammered the slug searched a foot nearer. Instantly the bucking explosion sounded again, then three times more, fast.

McVey lay still. That might or might not be Braden's only gun. Likely not, since he had expended those shots so freely. He had time for that thought when a whining rifle bullet slapped through the brush, to bury itself into the dust scant inches from his nose.

He caught his breath sharply. This foreman was good. He had caught the upkick of dust as Braden's slugs hit and he had laid his own shot accurately there. Between the two of them they'd search him out.

He lay utterly still. The rifle shot came again—two feet in front of him now.

Sweat dripped from his forehead and plopped into the dust. A mesquite thorn, moving in a windless air, clawed at his earlobe. A red ant crawled underneath his trouser's leg and bit sharply.

He lay still. The next rifle shot would come one foot back of the first one. It would hit him in the neck, behind the ears. Or it would angle down to crack his spine at the shoulder level. That was mathematical. An inch and a quarter ahead of his nose, then two feet ahead, then three feet back. . . .

This time, the savage whine of the bullet was just ahead of the wicked soundcrack of the Winchester. And the feel of the wound came two heartbeats after, as he knew that the next shot would be for the chilled small of his back. And then Helmholz moved. Either he had guessed that McVey was dead or he had decided that it was time to move in and flush the game. He moved, and showed himself a brief instant through the brush.

The sixgun in McVey's hand bucked, the roar of it loud. Helmholz gave a startled yelp and plunged backward through the brush. McVey lunged to his knees and up. He had hit Helmholz; he'd finish him now.

He shot again, blindly, into the brush, following the lunge of Helmholz' backward progress.

Then he rushed, because he wanted suddenly to hammer lead into that gross body and then feel the bite of his fingers into that thick neck.

A mesquite root lifted a wicked arm and tripped him so that he fell headlong. As he fell, Helmholz' shot whipped over his head, and then the man's pounding feet ended in an instant's pause that was followed by the rushing hammer of a spurred horse's hoofs.

McVey got to his knees half unbelieving. Helmholz was leaving the fight, running like a scared rabbit!

Sudden hot anger rushed through him, like a flood that had been too long withheld. He plunged through the brush, with mesquite and ocotillo thorns tearing his clothes and raking his flesh. He hit the trail and caught one glimpse of Helmholz' disappearing horse. His sixgun hammered at the horse's rump and then at the brush that hid them. But the fading thud of hoofbeats told him that he had missed.

He turned fast then, running the other way, and was in time to see a horse and rider break out of a hidden arroyo to the west and ride from sight.

He stood for a moment grim-mouthed, feeling the sweat run down from his armpits and start on his thighs to course down his legs. This had been an improvised

trap which had failed. Yet it should have worked. Almost anyone would have rushed up the trail for cover. Then he would have met Helmholz face to face—and would have died. McVey's own trail-wise instinct had saved him from that fate, and so Helmholz had ridden away. Not out of fear, but because Helmholz always played it safe.

Helmholz was no coward. Confronted by no other choice, he would shoot it out coolly and efficiently with any man. But why take a chance, when he could accomplish the same result without danger?

Yes, there would be another time and a surer time.

McVey rode back to the ranch. By the time he got there, he knew definitely what he had to do. He had to ride out; disappear. The odds were a lot too much to buck.

This foreman, for instance—he had not been in the Helmholz gang when McVey rode with them. Yet he was Jake Helmholz's man. And likely that whole Helmholz ranch crew were hired gunmen. Add them to the Helmholz outlaw bunch, and you had odds that no man in his senses would buck.

It was true also that if he did not pull out from Boardman's spread and disappear, Helmholz' next move might be to raid the ranch openly. In that case, Boardman and his daughter and his crew would fill a lot of empty graves.

Because this was Jim McVey's guess: It was Helmholz who was responsible for the rustling of Boardman's stock. He wanted that spread. And he had the money to buy it, because—as Red Jack Braden—he had gotten that money by robbing banks. But that, McVey decided, was Lee Boardman's problem. In the end, Jim guessed, he'd be likely to lose.

But it was clear that Helmholz had to get rid of Jim McVey. Jim was the only man, aside from Helmholz' own loyal crew, who knew his true identity. Jim was the one man, outside the gang, who could talk—particularly about the dead bank cashier in Broken Wheel. That little fact of murder meant that Helmholz had to get rid of Jim McVey, at any cost. And what was worse, he now had to get rid of Lee Boardman and his crew also, because Jim might have talked to them. He might have spilled to Boardman and the others the whole circumstances of the robbery and Jake Helmholz' dual identity.

But if McVey left soon enough, Helmholz might decide that only McVey knew, and that McVey had left quick because he was afraid of what Helmholz would do to him.

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MCVEY had a narrow twisted grin at that thought. As he rode the trail back and saw the cottonwoods and pepper trees of the home ranch show green and quiet in the sunset. It looked peaceful there, against the upthrust of the badlands and the far purple mountains beyond.

If only a man could live so, with the march of the days busy and serene and useful in their procession, with birth and growth and the easy succession of renewing life about him. . . .

He savagely shook that alien thought aside. It was not for him. His was a single lone-wolf life, violent and moving and destined for no soft end. All that other he had forfeited; it was irretrievably lost, even if he wished to regain it.

He thought that, just as the quiet scene before him was broken by the arrival of a rider who hurtled down the far slope and into the ranch yard like a skyrocket trailing dust behind it.

He could see the yard boil into activity almost at once, and he spurred ahead to a quick easy run.

When he rode in and dismounted, the crew was grouped in a semicircle facing

Lee Boardman. There was a blaze of excitement on their faces, and there was something new in the looks they turned on him—less hostility, more welcome. And yet a question also.

It was Lee Boardman who put the thing into words, crisply and at once. "We've got a line on the rustlers, McVey. They've taken a big bunch of cattle. And now I'm offering fightin' wages to every man on the spread. You want 'em?"

McVey's face hardened. This was the test he hadn't wanted. This was the final judgment he couldn't avoid.

"Why, no," he drawled. "I reckon I'll be ridin' on. I don't hanker for any fightin' pay."

Rio looked at him with a kind of hurt and sullen surprise in his eyes. But the tautness in his gunhand relaxed.

McVey's set face had no expression at all.

"Roll your soogans an' hit the trail," Boardman ordered curtly.

McVey shrugged and turned on his heel.

He got his things together, indifferent to the looks of the crew. He came out and roped his own horse. The sorrel had lived, but it was wind-broken and almost useless. Still, it would do to get into town with. He could pick up another there.

He pulled the cinch tight and then turned, hearing the soft scuff of boots be-

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The silence that fell was like that which might fall in a church if someone had blasphemed.

And then Rio broke out. "By God!" he swore. "I told you so! There's an even chance this maverick is in with the crowd that's rustlin' us. I say we string him up an' make shore!"

McVey's smile was suddenly thin and bitter. "Why, that's not a bad idee," he drawled. "Why don't you start the party, Rio?"

His pale eyes looked wide and attentive at the foreman. Rio's face lost a shade of color but his voice was steady and his right thumb was hooked just above the butt of his gun.

He said, "That'll be a pleasure."

Lee Boardman's voice ripped out. "That's enough. Either of you draws, I'll gut-shoot the man that goes for iron first."

His words cut sharp across the tension that would have broken in another moment in to gunplay.

side him. It was Leila Boardman. Her eyes no longer held any question. They were blazing with sheer contempt.

"I don't think you're in with the rustlers," she said. "I think you're merely yellow."

"Yes, yellow!" she whipped out, as though she had seen the involuntary protest in his eyes. "You may think that you don't care about anything but your own skin. But that's not it. You're—you're a coward! You let Rawhide save you, and what's that to you? Nothing! Because you haven't got the courage. . . ." Her voice broke a little. "You—you're contemptible!"

Rawhide appeared behind her. "Now, honey; now, honey," he said, worriedly. "Don't you go an' git yourself upset."

Then his old blue eyes shifted to Jim McVey. "The life you made out to save wasn't wuth the trouble you've turned out to be. You an' me is plumb even now. Git! An' the next time you see me, you better drag your iron, because one of us is

goin' to take back the life he earned."

Sudden hot anger whipped up in Jim McVey. He had an impulse to slam his gun-barrel at Rawhide's head, to slap this girl dizzy. And to smash down this ranch house that had sheltered him. But nothing of that showed in his face as he swung into the saddle and rode out.

After he had ridden a mile or so, the white hot flare of his anger subsided and an immense depression rode with him. It was hard for him to acknowledge, but on that ranch he had made two friends—old Rawhide Jones and Lee Boardman. And there was Rio, who hated him for no good reason, but who could be as strong a friend as he was an unrelenting enemy. And the rest of the crew—good men, every one; men whom any man would be proud to call friend.

He shook his shoulders disgustedly. Why was he going soft now? Hell, a man could buy a thousand such friends if he had enough money. They were for sale!

As for the girl—well, to hell with the girl! She was dumb, like women are dumb, but still she ought to have had better sense than to think he, Jim McVey, was yellow.

He flogged his spurs into the wind-broke animal that carried him, and knew a moment of remorse than he shoved down savagely. Damn them! He was going on their account, wasn't he?

The scarlet mists that drifted across his eyes cleared a moment, so that his look was cold and clear. Helmholz had enough men to wipe him out like a squashed fly. And he didn't particularly hanker to be a squashed fly. It seemed a stupid, useless, irritating end. To be killed by a pale-eyed louse, for a fool's reason!

There shouldn't have been that many things to think about. Not riding the trail he was riding. . . .

Then the voice that came at him out of the brush slapped like a cold towel: "—or I'll blow both you an' that cayuse apart!"

McVey was plunging out of the saddle before the third word. He hit the ground on his shoulder with both guns slamming lead at the brush.

Bullets slugged the ground about him like swarm of infuriated wasps slapping against a window. They came from every direction, so that he had a flash of knowledge that he had been surrounded, had ridden like a fool into an ambush and it was a miracle that half a dozen slugs had not driven through him.

He could think that in one bright sick flash before the pain seared across his scalp and exploded brilliantly inside his mind. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Doom of the BB Ranch

WHEN he waked up his hands and feet were numb and would not move. It was evident that he was paralyzed. A scarlet lance of agony across his scalp brought him a vague memory of what had happened after he left his horse.

Overhead, his eyes looked at the crude rafters of a cabin.

He shut his eyes again because they hurt.

A boot-toe thudded solidly into his ribs. "No playin' possum!" a voice growled. "I seen yuh come awake. Shake out of it!"

He looked up at a hard, stubble-whiskered face he didn't recognize.

"I hope you mean to kill me right quick," he whispered. "I hope that some for your sake—but mostly for my own."

The man blinked at him, jaw dropped a little. He started to speak and then changed his mind.

"I hope it for my sake, because I'd almost rather die than use my bare hands to rip the gullet out of a piece of half-human carrion like you. But that's what

I'm damn shore to do, unless I die quick."

The man paled a little. "You—you're goin' to die quick enough," he gulped. Then he recovered a little. "Why, you ain't got the chanct of a—"

"That's what you think," McVey told him gently. "But why would a hawg-wallowin', numbwitted fool like you have anything to think with?"

The man's voice rose weakly. "Hey, Les," he yelled. "He—he's awake!"

He gave back with obvious relief when the door slammed back and Les Thurber hard-heeled inside.

He came up and casually kicked McVey in the same place the whiskered man had kicked him.

McVey said nothing, he only looked. Thurber looked startled for a fleeting instant, and then his eyes hardened. "You'd be dead now if I hadn't of figgered Jake would want a word with yuh."

He bent down and rolled McVey over roughly. Thurber satisfied himself that the bonds were tight, and then turned back.

"I'd like to have a word with Jake," McVey said sardonically. "Why don't you bring him on?"

Thurber looked at him reflectively. "Mebbe I ought to have you beefed cold, at that," he murmured. "I got the idee that you was a wet-nosed kid, though you didn't look like that at the ranch. Now, I'm durn shore you aint' that."

Jim said, "I'd be obliged if you set me up against the wall. This has got kind of uncomfortable."

Thurber lifted him up. "Somethin' else yuh want?" he demanded drily.

McVey nodded. "Java and a quirley," he said.

Helmholz' foreman looked dubious for a moment, then reached down with a swift movement and untied Jim's hands. "I reckon you'll be smart enough not to try nothin'."

Jim nodded. "Might loosen them things on my ankles," he said indifferently. "No use havin' one part of me die before the rest."

The foreman's eyes chilled, but he shrugged and untied the ankles. "I'll be takin' your word," he said grimly, and tapped the butt of his gun.

McVey sat up and rubbed the circulation back. He accepted coffee and a cigarette and felt worse than he had before. He had caught a hard regret in Thurber's eyes, and it chilled him. The dumb brutality of the other man had been easy to deal with, but Thurber looked on him as a man already dead. And Thurber would be hard to fool.

Then Lunger Crippen walked in.

Lunger was one of the Helmholz gang whom McVey had known—and hated. Even the sun couldn't take the gray pallor out of his face or dim the over-bright death in his eyes. His emaciated figure swaggered a little as he walked, and his lips were deadly as a rattler's as he looked at Jim McVey.

"Tough boy," he said. "Out of one double-cross into another."

He paused with his bony fingers hooked over his gunbelts. "I don't like your ears," he said softly. They ain't too big, nor too little, nor too close-set, nor too flappy. They're just too damn' ordinary!"

His right hand flicked then like a lizard's tongue, and the thunder of the sixgun hammered back from wall to wall.

★

McVEY felt the blood drip from his left ear and course his neck in a slow warm stream. He knew then that he would have a nick in his ear for as long as he lived. But that didn't seem very important then, because he wasn't liable to live that day out. Nevertheless, the injury filled him with a colder rage than he had yet felt.

He said without moving, "Good shot,

Lunger. I couldn't do much better myself."

The consumptive stopped the flick of his other gun-hand with anrrowed eyes. "*Much* better? You think you can shoot with me, you fool?"

McVey said, expressionless, "Want to give me a gun and let me try?"

Thurber cut in, his voice burred with anger, "This ain't no turkey-shoot. You'll git no gun, McVey. An' you, Lunger, you put that hawgleg away."

The consumptive grinned mockingly. "Jake don't treasure him any," he drawled. "Jake framed him back there on that bank robbery because he didn't like the cut of his pants, an' he give orders not to kill him until he got here only because he thinks maybe McVey knows somethin'. Jake's kind of interested in findin' out how things stand, because he's a careful hombre, but—"

"Shut up," Thurber snarled. "You talk too much."

"So that's it?" McVey drawled. "You were layin' for me. How'd you know I'd be ridin' out?"

"Jake figgered that one." Thurber had a hint of admiration in his voice. "He figgered you wouldn't stay around and risk your hide, oncet you had found out how things stood."

"Yeah," Lunger cut in, his eyes cruel, "He figgered that if you didn't hit the trail before he jumped Boardman's ranch, you'd come runnin' out of there the minute he did, like a jackrabbit in a brush fire. So we didn't calculate to have to wait long. What he wants is to know if you figgered out about them waterholes in the badlands, an' if you talked it to Boardman."

"Shut up!" Thurber snarled at him again. "I told you you talked too much!"

The lunger's bloodless lips pulled back in a thin snarl. "That's twice you've told me to shut up, Thurber," he purred. "When Jake is done with his fool plan to wipe out this ranch I'll ask you to tell it to me again."

Thurber stared at him with his face cold and blank. "So you had to let it out anyhow!" he said softly. "I reckon I won't need to tell you to shut up again till after it's over. Then I think it's goin' to please me plenty."

McVey let out his breath softly, in a long, inaudible sigh. He had caught it in when the consumptive had first interrupted, knowing that he was hearing a plan that he was not meant to hear.

"It'll please me some, too," Lunger said, laughing softly, "in case we all come out of this foolishness together."

"Thats twice you've let on it was a fool plan," Thurber said grimly. "Why don't you tell Jake you think so. I don't remember hearin' you pipe up about it when he lined it up."

Lunger had his bloodless, mirthless grin. "Ever sit an' feel the bugs eatin' away at your lungs?" he asked softly. "Ever know that whatever you did, good or bad, it would all come to the same thing? Ever remember that what your maw did for you an' what you did for yourself was nothin', because a lot of maggots was in you pullin' you down, destroyin' you? Me, I ain't interested in makin' anythin' a success. If Jake Helmholz had got maggots in his brain instead of his chest that'll pull him down an' destroy him, why, that's all right with me. An' if the maggots make him destroy some other things an' people before he goes out, why I like it all the better.

"Jake's gone hog wild. This thing is goin' to be open murder, killin' half a dozen people, an' one of them a girl. Somethin' is sure to slip an' the thing will catch up with Jake sooner than he thinks.

"But I ain't the man to stop it. I want to see it go on. I want to see the fools die in their blood and the house go up in pretty red flames, and then maybe the

devil will let me live long enough to see Jake get his."

His eyes held a madman's fanatic glow, and for a moment the look of them held Les Thurber uneasily silent.

"Good for you, Lunger!" Jim McVey said softly. "For that, I'm not goin' to kill you like I'd planned, after I get loose. I'll shoot you in the nose—just to make it a little harder for you to get breath. Then I'm goin' to sit by an' listen to you mouth-breathin', while Helmholz jerks from the rope."

The Lunger's eyes blazed with insane fury. He was cursing McVey with such intensity that he did not hear the door open behind him, nor feel the sudden tension that ran through the room. His voice ended high-pitched: "Helmholz will hang, all right," he raged, "but you—you—"

A heavy palm slammed across his ear from behind. It knocked him forward, so that he stumbled against one of McVey's outstretched boots. He fell with his skinny chest against McVey's forehead.

"Hang, will I?" Helmholz' jarring, outraged voice was like saw. "By God, I'll teach you to—"

The Lunger had bounced back from McVey's head and whirled, his hands going to the butts of his guns before he saw that Jake Helmholz already had a gun bared, pointing at his belly.

"Go ahead and pull 'em," Helmholz urged. "I want you to."

★

THE Lunger looked like a wicked and starved weasel. "I can pull 'em an' kill you before you can wrap—that—thick finger around—the—trig—"

His voice broke off into a paroxysm of coughing. Thurber and the thick-featured man watched fascinated, a faint horror in their eyes. But Jake Helmholz stepped forward with his gun lifted.

"Don't cough at me!" he was saying as the Colt crashed across the thin, convulsed face.

But he had stepped within range of McVey's feet, and that was all McVey wanted. He kicked him in the belly, with the full power of a violent thigh behind it.

Helmholz' breath went out in a great gasping, agonized grunt. He doubled over, his face white, as McVey whipped to his feet.

His right hand snatched the sixgun from Helmholz' hand, while his left grasped the tortured hulk and dragged it to shield him. It was a gesture that was almost needless. Thurber had been caught so off guard that he was only now digging for his sixgun, whereas the beefy-faced gunman had not even started.

McVey shot Thurber fast, an off-center shot as the man whirled. But the beefy faced man was coming up then, grunting with the effort as his whole body drove his gunhand down and up.

McVey caught him as his Colt muzzle began to tip upward and blasted him backward as though the slug had been a hurricane.

For one throbbing second then, McVey stood half-confused. The thing had happened too fast to be quite taken in. In the space of three fast heartbeats, the Lunger and Jake Helmholz had been put out of action, and Thurber had been shot and the beef-faced renegade had been killed. . . . And he, McVey was free—for the moment!

He moved, swiveling, and jumped feet first through the window.

His heels hit the ground, ploughing, with his body hurtling sideways, and a shot slammed at him instantly. And a second slug missed as he rolled.

"Hell! A sheepherder could do better with a tin can," McVey snarled and shot. Slats Fargo looked at him as though he were curiously surprised, and abruptly slapped downward on his face.

Behind were saddled horses and McVey ran for them. He could hear feet begin to pound in front of the cabin, and then pause and then advance hesitantly. Whoever it was had a healthy reluctance to shove his head recklessly into the range of sixgun fire. And that reluctance let him get to the best looking of the horses and into the saddle.

He had one glimpse then of a narrow-walled valley with two entrances, really only a wide place in a canyon. He took the entrance nearest him and hammered for it, with all the speed the stolen roan could muster.

One shot sang past him and then a bearded familiar face rose out of the rocks with a Winchester leveled. McVey's shot slammed into the rocks just below and whipped up enough splinters to spoil the Winchester's aim. Then he was around a turn of the canyon and on his way.

Five minutes brought him to a high point where he could look at his back trail and also survey the country round about.

He saw then that he was in the hills some ten miles from where he had been taken riding out of Lee Boardman's place. And he sat there, looking about at country which was almost familiar to him, but not quite, for he had done little riding since his arrival at Boardman's spread. From here he could go on, and he didn't think anybody would have an easy time catching him.

He took a long breath of air and realized suddenly that it was the warm clear air of middle morning. Had he been that long unconscious? Was it the idea or the fact that made him feel suddenly weak. That crease on the head had been close and bad, and he felt suddenly weak. But that wound could have been death. And he didn't feel so bad, after all. He felt fine, in a kind of light-headed way.

In fact, he never had felt better. And he was free! He was free even of his consuming anger against that girl who had been dumb enough to think him yellow. He was free of this country and the problems Lee Boardman had, and of the death that had sat on his shoulder ever since Jake Helmholz showed up.

★

A FOOL, he thought exultantly, would have stuck by Boardman. Or, if not that, he would be so full of hatred for Helmholz as to stick around and get himself killed trying to achieve revenge. He, Jim McVey, was no such fool, however.

Someday he would kill Holmholz if that outlaw range-hog happened to keep on living. Meanwhile there was a lot country to be visited and the morning air and the blue distance and the smell of sage, and the dim smoky horizon. Smoky . . .?

For that was more than mist. That fire must be nearer than he thought, because there was the faint crackle of sharply caught logs. . . . Hell! What was he thinking of? That was gunfire!

But and even as he listened the sound died away entirely, as though it had not existed outside his own strained imagination.

He laughed harshly. If the Boardman's were getting it, they were getting what they had asked for. They might have had his help if they had had sense enough to have treated him decently.

By God, it would be simple! There'd be two spreads vacant—spreads—just as Helmholz had said—that operated together would be a gold mine. He was sure now that there were water-holes in the badlands, which Lunger had mentioned. That was how they had been able to rustle the Boardman cattle—spotting a tank a quarter of the way up and letting the rustled stock drink, and then spotting another tank three quarters of the way on.

That just made it! If you hadn't had the hidden water holes, there wouldn't be any chance. It would take too many wagons, too much water. But with the water holes you had summer range, and you could run double the number of cattle. You could run one of the greatest ranches in the cow-country! You could. . . .

The eager run of his thoughts broke off in the sudden overwhelming understanding that he, Jim McVey, could really swing this deal. Jake Helmholz thought that he had made a fool of Jim McVey from the beginning. But the main reason for his wanting to get Jim out of the picture was that he suspected—without really knowing—that Jim had overheard something that would give him the key to Helmholz' cache of loot. And he wasn't wrong about that!

Jim did know. And when Helmholz was dead and the Boardman outfit wiped out, the money Helmholz had cached would buy both ranches—for McVey! That would be a kind of bitter justice worth a man's taking. Helmholz had deliberately double-crossed him. Now, dying, Helmholz would pay for Jim McVey's final prosperity!

His eyes blazed as his pony ran north—blazed with the triumphant, grim, exultant sense of his purpose—of the cards he held. A winning hand at last! He could see himself, James Jarvis McVey, a powerful and respected cattleman—a big man in the state. . . . Maybe even a senator in Washington with a hand in world affairs. Jim McVey—ex-outlaw. . . !

The heat of his mind ran out into a dream of all the people who would soon look up to him and respect him. Harve Cordy, his cousin, and Beth his wife. Steve Purdis, who ran a small store and had once scorned him. And Joe Stavin, to whom he owed a favor. He'd make Joe rich, he thought grinning openly, just out of meanness. And then, well, there was. . . . But what in hell was the matter with him?

Rawhide Jones and he were even up. He didn't owe Rawhide anything. As for impressing that girl . . . Well, she'd be dead. What was that to him? A dumb girl that thought he was yellow!

And her father who thought *he* was Gold Almighty!

He pulled up his horse so sharply that the animal's sliding hoofs struck sparks from the rocky trail bed. He felt suddenly sick. It wasn't any damn use.

He couldn't do it. A man with decent common sense could do it, and live happy ever after. But Jim McVey always had been a damn' fool—and you can't change what a man is.

He pulled his horse around and started back up the trail he had taken. The smoke was less now, almost non-existent, but a vagrant current of air still brought the faint, far crackle of gunfire. He put the steel to his horse gently, breaking him into a fast, smooth run.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Fool Rides Home to Die!

THE ranch house looked curiously quiet and serene when he reached the rise overlooking it. The cottonwoods rippled in the breeze and the pepper trees swept gracefully back and forth, and the scent of palo verde was gentle in the air.

The only thing that made it different from every day was the occasional sharp spasmodic crack of a Winchester and the flat *tunk* of lead smacking into 'dobe. And then pale smoke would blossom from a window and a vengeful crack would answer.

He sat there, watching the disposition of Helmholz' forces, checking them by the bloom of gunsmoke and the crackle of reports, until he was well satisfied of the

whole sitaution. It was plain enough that Helmholz had caught the defenders when they were there and ready to stand off a siege.

That was what Helmholz had wanted. All of them there, so that nobody would escape! His men, trained gun-fighters, were closing in from all sides. They had fired the barns, so that the only fort was the house, and now they were closing in quietly and competently—the end calculated and sure, and no hurry about it.

McVey drew a long, bitter breath. He wished with all his soul that he wasn't the kind of damn fool who had to go in there now, and lose out with the rest of them.

He put steel suddenly to his horse and drove him laboring down the slope. Two men turned panic-stricken faces toward him, lining their rifles desperately. Their movements were curiously jerky, and the pop of their rifles faint in his ears against the hammering of his horse's hoofs.

He pulled his own guns and shot carefully at the left-hand man. The slug took him just under the breastbone and slapped him backwards as though a high wind had hit him.

The vicious, keening cry of the second man's bullet hurt McVey's eardrum. And then he saw, incredulously, that his own shot had missed. The man was still erect and frantically levering his rifle.

He triggered just as McVey's second shot also unaccountably missed. And then there was a wild second when the hammering hoofs of the roan thundered crescendo and the rifle went off. Burning powder grains seered McVey's face, and his right wrist surged up and down. His gun-barrel caught the man fair in the face, and McVey was driving wildly toward the ranch house.

Lead whistled about him. His horse jumped suddenly as though he had been stung by a bee, but lunged onward. A slug nipped the skin over McVey's spine and seared his ribs on the other side. Another snarled through his billowing shirt. And then he was in front of the house door, flinging himself from the saddle as his horse lunged, head downward, to the ground.

The door swung open, showing a fleeting glimpse of Lee Boardman's square grim face.

"Come in, son." The voice was almost gentle. "I figgered you might finally show up."

"McVey came in fast. "You're a fool, then!" he rasped, as the heavy door swung shut behind him.

"Mebbe," Lee Boardman smiled faintly. "But so are you."

McVey said nothing. And found himself looking in the calm eyes of Leila Boardman.

"So you weren't a coward, after all," she said aloofly.

He looked at her and made a noise which sounded like, "Ar-ragh!"

Absurdly, it brought a sudden delighted smile to her lips. He turned away, seeing Rawhide, with his arm dripping red from a wound that extended from elbow to shoulder.

"What are the chances here?" he demanded harshly.

Rawhide shook his head, coughing a little. "Yuh should of stayed out," he said. "There ain't no chances."

Lee Boardman cut in grimly. "The only chance we got is half a dozen sticks of dynamite. When they come close enough, why, what's left of us are going to try to get 'em to rush the door. An' then we'll blow 'em to hell!"

"With you goin' with 'em."

Boardman nodded. "But it'll be worth it if Helmholz is with 'em."

"You're loco," McVey growled, and turned to a window, his guns barking.

They were closing in. He could see now that there wasn't a chance, even here in daylight.

HE SHOT the hat off an advancing Helmholz man, and missed the gun arm of another, and hit another dead center in the forehead. Lead whined and snarled around him, plunking into the 'dobe at his side.

A slug cut his cheek like a surgeon's knife, missing bone. He reloaded his Colts, forgetting to take cover while he did so and put a hot slug into a man who indiscreetly tried to change cover.

But under Jake Helmholz' squawling voice they were closing in—a full score of them—and this fight was lost. They were doomed, as he'd known they would be.

He shot again and then his head jerked up. A party of horsemen had appeared suddenly on the rise before the house. They looked curiously familiar. Especially one iron-hard figure leading them.

He cursed, suddenly, bitterly. "That's Sheriff Ike Sutter!"

"What'll he do?" Lee Boardman asked at his elbow.

"He'll do what any sensible man would do!" McVey snapped at him. "He'll wait until the fight is over and then find out what it's all about."

"That'll be a little too late for us," Boardman remarked grimly, his voice strangely calm in the howl of gunfire that filled the room.

Behind him, Rio gave a wet hoarse grunt and collapsed, blood bursting from his mouth.

"I'm going out to get Sutter," McVey said. "Get me that dynamite."

"And if you get him, and if we win," Boardman said with equal grimness, "what'll you do? Go back with him to be hanged?"

"What's that to you?" McVey snarled. "Get me the dynamite!"

Boardman shrugged and got him the dynamite.

McVey fixed fuses into three sticks and then opened the side door of the ranch house.

"Kid," Boardman said. "I want you to know that—"

But the words were drowned out in the burst of the first stick. It fell short, and the smoke it made prevented McVey from knowing how much damage it had done. He threw the next one to the right and harder, and the third to the left. And then he ran, crouching, his guns ready for anything ahead of him, but the only bullets came from the sides. He passed

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something ragged and bloody that looked as though it had been a man, and then he was zigzagging while lead howled and nipped at his clothes.

That for a breathless instant, and then Ike Sutter was before him.

He talked fast, and when he had done, Ike Sutter moved.

"Gents," he said to his posse, "we got what we come for. You willin' to do a little extra work to pay for it?"

The sharp, growled assent was one with the pulse pounding in McVey's ears, and then their horses were slamming past him, down the slope, with their guns going.

McVey caught the last horse, like a hobo swinging onto a freight car. He got up behind the posseman and rode so until a saddle ahead emptied. He caught that horse, swinging outward and down and then up into the saddle, hardly breaking the animal's wild stride.

★

AHEAD of him he saw Ike Sutter, guns hammering, swing so as to enfilade the circle about the ranch house. He saw the door of the house burst open and the defenders swarm out, like so many angry hornets. He saw the circle of the attackers break and run, finally, Jake Helmholz raised up howling curses at his men, trying to make them stand.

McVey drove his horse for Jake.

Helmholz, in his fury, had waited a little too long. He was still stationary when McVey drove toward him.

He pulled his gun up and triggered savagely, but he was late. McVey felt the butt of his Colt hammer against his palm and saw the slug slap dust over Helmholz' heart. He felt like saying, "So long, Jake," but he only watched Helmholz pitch out of the saddle like a sack of meal as he hammered by.

It was over then. Those of Helmholz'

He was waiting when McVey drove toward him. . . .

men who had not been hit had raced for their horses and were hitting for the far horizon.

Only the Lunger had been caught, like a living skeleton walking stick, when he was trying to pull himself from under his fallen horse.

McVey looked at him savagely and raised his gun, but then a sudden feeling of pity ran through him. He could not do the thing he had promised. "Lunger, look at your saddle horn," he said softly. "It's the bridge of your nose." And he shot the extreme tip of the horn off.

The Lunger looked at him wide-eyed, gasping.

And then McVey went back to face Ike Sutter and Lee Boardman.

As he rode he was unconscious of the mask of blood that was his face or of his two body wounds. He faced them grimly, quietly.

"I've had it kind of wrong," he said evenly. "But I think I've got it right now, so you can take me off, Ike. I was framed into that bank robbery, but I can't prove it, I reckon. It'll have to stand like it is. Only—I didn't shoot the teller. And I wouldn't have."

Ike Sutter looked at him coldly. "And who the hell are you, hombre?"

McVey stared.

"This," Lee Boardman said, "is one of my hands. He's been workin' for me too long to have been mixed up in the robbery you're looking after."

Ike Sutter grunted. "Likely it's some other McVey. Anyway, I got reason to believe that the one I was after was framed into holdin' the horses and didn't have nothing to do with the job. Jack Braden, who turns out to be Helmholz, was the man I was really after. I wanted McVey to testify against Helmholz. But after all the teller didn't die, an' Helmholz did. Looks like no case."

"Mebby you're right," Lee Boardman said calmly, "but anyway, it's got nothin' to do with us."

McVey sat down suddenly, because a lot of blood had come out of him, and he was now beginning to feel its absence.

"You're hurt," Leila Boardman said. "Can't you be a little sensible, for once?"

He stared at her. "Sensible? What are you talking about?"

"Why," she said gently, "you might lie down, in case—in case you don't want to kiss anybody first." Her voice broke.

He looked at her.

"You—you thought I was yel—" he murmured.

"I didn't!" she snapped at him indignantly. "I wanted you to—to stay!"

She began to cry a little. He took her suddenly into his arms and kissed her.

After a long while, when she had pulled gently away, he looked up at Lee Boardman and said, "I know what to do to make your ranch pay."

"Yes? Then why don't you—? But Boardman's voice died off in his ears because Leila had put her arms around him.

After a kind of eternity, he looked up to find Boardman still looking at him. "To hell with you an' your ranch!" he said.

Lee Boardman grinned at him. "I'm an old man," he said, "and I've just retired. To hell with you and *your* ranch!"

THE END

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★ ★ BULLWHIPS FOR

By Tom Roan

He sent the whip uncoiling, like a powerful, deadly snake, hissing through the air. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Hell Cut Loose!

BLOODSHED had already marred the afternoon when he rode in with the Montana sun throwing the last of its crimson light on the black tops of mountains in the west. He was a heavy-set figure in gray, riding squashed back in the old Mexican saddle on a tall white horse that looked like a cantering tomb-

PURGATORY ★ ★ ★

Smashing "Bullwhip Bill" Novel

None but the immortal old hell-bat, Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, would be willing to join those broken, beaten cowmen at Crazy Creek, whom Sheriff Hank Hardy had nicely bottled up in stores and saloons—for the first man to stick his neck out far enough would get is blown plumb off!

stone mounted on four fast legs. He had the look of an ordinary saddle tramp, one either trying to find a job, or trying to get away from one. As a matter of fact

he had come to town to do a job—and do it in his own bombastic, hell-may-care way.

At the weather-cracked public stables, across the street from the Crazy River Saloon, he swung to the right, entered the broad hallway, and oozed himself out of his saddle.

No one came forward at once to take charge of his horse. Bullwhip Bill McCrackin did not expect it. At the moment Crazy River was undergoing the quietly simmering period of waiting for the lid again to blow off of hell.

No horses stood at the many hitch-cracks up and down the main street. Yet the town was filled with cowpunchers, bronc twisters and cattlemen. Their saddled horses stood ready for a fast get-away in the alleyways and side streets. More than a score of them stood in the willow thicket above the deep bank of the river behind the places of business on the west side of the street.

The sudden roar of a gun would set another quick ball of death rolling. For the men of Crazy River and the surrounding rangelands had become like a great swarm of bobcats brought to bay by a pack of hounds. Crazy River was down to the grim realization that all that was useless. After nearly forty years as a cow-country it was going to sheep, and the galling pill of the coming change-over was something to swallow far worse than poison.

"Yuh a Sheriff Hank Hardy man or ain't yuh?" The speaker slumped out of the growing shadows from the rear end of the hallway. He was a man of sixty-odd, gray hat slouched low over a thinly bearded face, an old Colt dangling from a worn holster at his right hip. "If yuh are, I own these stables an' we can or can't do business fast, mister."

"Maybe we can." McCrackin's eyes narrowed as he paused in the start he had made to unsaddle Gabriel's Trumpet. "First off, I ain't no Sheriff Hank Hardy man. I wear no dog collar with some man's name on it, an' I ain't yet gone in for sheep. I—"

"Enough said!" cut in the stableman, pushing forward in the shadows to take charge of the unsaddling himself. "If yuh was a Hardy buzzard I'd have no room for yuh. Feed an' stable's a dollar, an' I feed a hoss when—Good Gawd!"

His hands had just reached the latigo, and he stumbled backward as if he had been struck with a fist. "That's the biggest an' slickest-lookin' damn snake I ever saw!"

"Two of 'em!" grinned McCrackin, looking at the pile of black coils around his saddle horn. "They won't bite. They've had their fangs pulled."

"They might—might still be able to gum!" The stableman's voice quivered. "Anyhow, I don't want 'em in here. But—but, say, that ain't snakes!" He laughed nervously. "That's a pile of whips! Bullwhips, by gosh! What whoppers! I'm just weak-eyed. Gimme a dollar an' finish unsaddlin' that hoss yourself. I'm sorter unnerved an' need a drink. Just thinkin' of a snake jars me. Take any stall yuh want. There's feed in that big box, hay in the loft, an' mighty fine drinkin' whiskey acrost the street. Ain't responsible for stolen ridin' gear. My name's Buzz Buzzby. 'Drop over to the Crazy when yo're done with yore hoss."

★

McCRACKIN found a box-stall, and turned the horse into it. When he had finished taking off the animal's bridle and saddle he piled them on one end of the long feed-box. Of late Gabriel's Trumpet had developed the neat little habit of kicking the fire out of any stranger venturing into his stall, and the riding gear and the old rifle hanging to the saddle would be safe here.

When he left the stall to go to the big box for oats, three men on the graveled sidewalk in front of the stables were watching him. They were a hard-looking trio, ready for anything a man might start.

McCrackin was certain that he had seen that tall, hawk-nosed fellow of forty somewhere. His hair was straight, coarse and black. Indian in that rooster! The dying light seemed to pool the rapidly gathering shadows around him; yet even in the shadows McCrackin placed him.

Sundown Jack Wolfblood from the Yellowstone Country! No mistake about that. A dangerous breed, quarter Nez Percé, Negro, Mexican and white—a mixture to make a man as tough as whang leather when he decided to be tough. And Sundown Jack had killed two men on the Yellowstone before he was fifteen. In the penitentiary and out, he was one cold-blooded killer one could expect to find in a place where a gun-war was brewing.

The men had drifted away when McCrackin came out of the stables. But other gunmen were here, scads of them walking the streets at every hand. McCrackin had seen that at a glance as he crossed the old wagon bridge, and he had expected to find it like this long before he had started up the ninety-mile river trail from Silver Falls.

Every gunman in sight carried a six-shooter at either hip, and probably a hide-out in his bosom. Some of them—evidently a little more afraid of mob violence than the others—strolled up and down the graveled and boarded walks with rifles or sawed-off shotguns cradled across the crooks of their arms.

A couple of minutes of stalling in the front of the stables convinced McCrackin that the gunmen were making it a point to keep away from the drinking places unless they walked through them in small groups to look over the sullen crowds as if searching for some one.

Sheriff Hank Hardy had the situation in a bag. A powerful man bull-necked, bull-chested, of fifty, it was a well-known fact that Hardy had been importing gunmen into Crazy River for weeks. For the most part they were whisper-spoken and shifty-eyed—men who were cool-headed and just devil enough to tackle any job. It was costing a fortune, but Crazy River and the far-flung rangelands surrounding the towns were worth it.

Things were not pretty here, but they were sure to get worse before morning. Cattle were bawling on a big flat on the curve of the river east of the town. Down there great herds of the brutes were jammed into the sea of loading pens alongside the railroad tracks. On the south side of the river bend were other herds packed into a mile-square corral of hastily strung barb wire and poles. Guards were everywhere, watching and waiting men with rifles, all cocked, primed and ready to shoot at the drop of a hat!

The mile-long cattle trains would start arriving some time during the night. At daylight they would start loading the cattle, train-load after train-load. They would go down over the rough mountain tracks to join the main line at Silver Falls. There they would be at once routed eastward to the markets for the big sell-off, and all this Crazy River Country would be left as cowless as the palm of a man's hand.

McCrackin hoped that Sundown Jack had not recognized him. He was keeping that hope in his thoughts as he strolled across the street, his old ivory-butter .45's rocking at his hips and one of his wicked 20-foot whips coiled over his right shoulder like a sleeping blacksnake.

Sundown Jack would be a tough hombre to lock horns with right off the reel. What a man wanted here was a little time, a chance to look the situation over before deciding on the first desperate move.

It had been more than five years since McCrackin had set foot in the town. Even then he had been only a stranger passing through it. He had had no trouble here.

"An' Sundown Jack never saw me in action," he growled as he passed the Crazy River Saloon and headed for a little café three doors above it. "Maybe he won't remember right off who I am."

★

FOUR cowpunchers were at the counter when he stepped inside the café. A heated argument had been going on. The men turned, studied him arrogantly for a moment, and went on with their quarreling as McCrackin gave his order to the lean old cook behind the counter.

"Yuh can't tell me!" A big, hawk-faced man was the chief spokesman. "Right from the start that bank business was a deal to crook ever' man who would lis'en to it. Once they set hand to pen an' paper they was floatin' down hell's river without a paddle. How did these old-timers know they'd be responsible for ever'thing that happened to the bank? How did they know by just bein' members of the board, or whatever they call it, they would have to give up their homes, their rangelands, an' ever' damn cow in sight just because of a couple of hold-ups that still smell like a polecat to me?"

"Ain't nobody arguin' that, Crow!" exploded a short, heavy-set man. "What's known is known. It was a crook deal when that bank went bust across the street, but here we are, all of us in town slobberin' at the mouth, an' only a few with gumption an' guts enough to stay back outside an' still try to fight."

"Yeah, an' what'll they get!" sneered a little, amazingly thin cowboy. "The Wolf Creek Kid's out there, still stayin' out of Hank Hardy's clutches, all right, an' keepin' what's left of the cow an' hoss crowd what'll stay at his side. But in the end, what? Every cow's down yonder in them pens an' that big corral. They're tight-guarded, an' all the law's on the other side. The Wolf Creek Kid's game, we know, but he can't beat Hank Hardy's set-up. Cows are goin' out, sheep are comin' in. That's all yuh can hear people say. All they can say!"

"That gang of lawyer fellas in Silver Falls worked it!" The fourth man, a tall, lean individual who looked like an old outlaw, brought his fist down on the counter with a bang. "Ain't I allus said yuh was cuttin' yore own throat when yuh signed a paper with a lawyer settin' in on the deal? A lawyer goes to school to find out how to be a thief! Take a lightnin' rod deal I know of down in Wyomin'—"

"Yuh take it, Bullet!" sneered the little man.

"Shut up, Gopher!" Again the old man brought his fist down with a bang. "Lightnin' killed some few folks down there one summer years ago. That fall the lightnin' rod men moved in. 'Pay as yuh go' was the slogan. 'Nothin' down, just pay as yuh can!'

"Well, ever'body signed up papers to have lightnin' rods put on the barns. A lawyer had writ them papers. They was a mile of 'em, like papers are when a lawyer gets through. No straight to the point with a lawyer. Well, they signed, an' what? The lightnin' rods come, all right. With 'em come plows, patent churns, barrels of sheep dip, manure spreaders, seeders, binders, an' all sorts of farmin' truck hittin' belly-bust into a hard an' fast cow country. Hell blowed off the lid, but the courts held it was legal. The judges stayed with the lawyers, 'cause judges are lawyers, too, yuh know. They're still cussin' an' payin' for farm truck down there."

"What's that got to do with this?"

"It's the same deal with a new shirt on

it. Ain't these people bein' robbed because a bank went bust? Just 'cause their names happened to be signed on the proper line as standin' four-square behind the bank an' all its doin's?"

"Thanks for a good steak." McCrackin tossed money on the counter for his meal, and hitched up his heavy old gun-belts as he arose and spoke to the cook. "Seein' how some folks take things lyin' down, I suppose yo'll be servin' fried lamb chops for breakfast!"

"Damn yuh, I figured yuh was a hoss-thief or a badge-toter!" the cook reached for a frying pan, but McCrackin slipped on out the door and turned down the street in the gathered darkness, leaving the man cursing behind him. Before he could reach the Crazy River Saloon the cook, speechless with rage, was out on the sidewalk shaking his pan at him. McCrackin only grinned back over his shoulder, and walked on.

He saw Buzz Buzzby with his face outlined in flickering candlelight and shadows as he pushed through the swinging doors of the Crazy River. The man was at the head of the crowd and bellied up against the bar.

Beyond Buzzby the long line of weather-hardened faces were as grim as those of men waiting to see their best friend hanged. The two tall, gray-haired bartenders were just as glum.

"This dude's all right," volunteered Buzzby as McCrackin moved up beside the man and one of the bartenders looked at him with a questioning glint in his eyes. "Hoss is in my stables, an' wouldn't be there if he was a Hardy man."

"Welcome to our city, pard." The bartender's voice was almost a whisper as he slid the bottle forward and thumbed McCrackin a glass. "Yore first drink's on me, if what Buzz Buzzby is sayin' is true. If it *ain't,*" his eyes suddenly seemed to burn, "Hank Hardy's got a barrel of whiskey down at the jailhouse."

"Thanks for the joy-water!" McCrackin filled his glass and lifted it. "Here's to sheep!" He glanced down the bar, watching the tensed faces suddenly go white in the candlelight. "May they rest in hell!"

"That, pardner," the bartender expelled a breath of sudden relief, "calls for two drinks on me. Yo've heard, I see, that cows are goin' out of the Crazy Country, an' sheep's supposed to be comin' in right soon?"

"Already comin' in," nodded McCrackin. "When them trains start arrivin' durin' the night, well, ever' cattle car will be filled with woolies. Anybody want a job herdin' 'em?"

Again tensed faces grew white. Men looked at each other, hands tightening on the rail of the bar. Talking like that to this crowd was like touching a match to a fuse leading to dynamite.

"Not that I'm startin' anything." McCrackin shrugged as he poured himself another drink. "Peace an' gentle, an' rocked in the cradle of salvation—that's me. Just happened to hear down the line about some folks havin' trouble up this way. A fella I met down the river said yo'd had some little shootin' spree this afternoon. He was lyin', I guess? Hell, yuh fellas wouldn't do that, meek as yuh appear?"

A sudden burst of shots answered him from the street. A .45 started the barking. Its noise was punctuated by the double-barreled roaring of a shotgun. Buckshot rattled against the front of the Crazy River Saloon. Slats flew out of the swinging doors. A booted and chapped figure came plunging headfirst through them. Hatless and pop-eyed, a great smear of blood streaming from the right side of his face, he kept up his falling run until he reached the center of the room. A sudden colliding with a big-bellied cast-iron stove brought him down as he upset the stove with a grunt and rolled over on his side.

It was all a man had time to see. Big hats came smashing down on the candles along the bar, and with the stove-pipe falling the room was thrown into darkness blinding stifling clouds of soot rose up while Buzz Buzzby slammed the nail-studded front doors and threw the heavy bars in place.

CHAPTER TWO

"Sing, Damn Yuh, Sing!"

THE man who had barged in was dead by the time the front doors were closed. Two cowboys—evidently his friends—rushed to the body as McCrackin headed at once for the rear door. Getting caught among hostile gunfighters, like flies ganging up on a molasses jug, was something that never suited a man who knew his way around in a general lead-throwing stampede.

He had come to Crazy River for only one thing, and that was to help prevent a sheep crowd from taking over the country. In Silver Falls he had been offered a job here as one of Hank Hardy's paid killers, and it had insulted him.

"Legitimate or unlegitimate," he had told the lantern-jawed Sheriff Seth Tracy of Silver Falls, "I ain't never been too close to the side of the law. Crazy River's been robbed blind with the help of the law, an' when I go in the robbin' business it may be suspected that I wan't have the law on my side. It generally ain't anyhow, regardless of how close I try stickin' to the foot of the cross an' my ingrained salvation. Besides, I'm told that yo're a brother-in-law to Hank Hardy, an' that thought alone gives me a sorter sickish feelin' at the pit of my stomach."

Pushing his way now through the crowd, one man leaped in front of him and beat him to the rear door. The man was only eight feet ahead when he took a long jump to carry him down the three steps to the ground, and McCrackin had just time enough to skid to a halt as a shotgun roared outside.

The man in the lead suddenly became like a bag in the wind. A double-charge of buckshot had caught him in mid-air. As if his arms and legs had gone loose in their sockets he flapped around, hat flying off, and turned a complete barrel-roll in the air. He landed on the back of his neck and folded into a shapeless wad on the ground.

"Stand clear!" McCrackin jabbed back the rush of men behind him with his elbows, and the long whip came down from his shoulder. "I'll handle this!"

The whip was streaking forward a second later. As a living thing in Bullwhip Bill McCrackin's hands, the wicked black coils went hissing out the door with the noise of a shot.

It was a blind drive in the dark, and yet the whip caught a killer by the left arm, and hauled him forward. In a desperate struggle with the whip he was half-dragged up and across the steps. He was given another furious jerk, and the shotgun dropped from his right hand. Then he was snaked inside like a fighting fish on a line.

"Grab 'im!" McCrackin gave the whip the last jerk that swung the killer to his hands and knees at the foot of the crowd. "Nail 'im to the floor, boys! I don't like people who shoot blind at anything they see runnin' in the dark."

"Let up!" snarled the man on the floor as a big cowpuncher leaped into the air and came down on his back with both feet. "Yuh can't treat the law like this! I—I'm a deputy sheriff!"

"Music to our ears, mister deppity polecat!" yelled a gray-bearded cattleman. "Stomp 'im through the floor, Steamboat Jackson! Give 'im heels an' spurs like they've give 'em to us at ever' chance!"

"Hold on!" ordered McCrackin. "We might want 'im so he can run when the

time comes. Yuh can take his ears an' eyebrows, but leave legs on 'im, big fella!"

"Why leave anything on the louse?" barked back Jackson, still hammering the gunman like a man killing snakes. "This is Dode Pardon. He shot a cowboy in the back this afternoon!"

There was no use for McCrackin to try to argue. He was back at the door and soon hauling in another man. It was a cowpuncher this time, a long, lean man running to gain fighting shelter from a mob of gunmen pouring out of a narrow alleyway behind him.

He was recognized at once by the crowd and hauled to his feet as the busy whip again snaked out in the night. This time it dragged in a short, round-waisted little gunman with a black square of felt over his right eye.

"Patch McQuirt!" yelled the cattleman behind McCrackin as the gunman was sprawled face-forward on the floor and Steamboat Jackson took another flying leap in the air to come down in the middle of the paid killer's back. "One of the best murderin' wolves in Hank Hardy's pack! Stranger, yuh shore know what to do with a whip!"

"Ought to." McCrackin spoke from the side of his mouth. "Been prankin' around with such things since I was big enough to start wearin' britches."

He sent the whip slashing out just once more. This time his fighting fish on the line was another prize catch. Caught by the wrist, Sundown Jack was hauled inside.

A six-shooter was in his hand. McCrackin caught the man's wrist with a blow from the heavy whip's butt, and the Colt fell out of it as if every bone in Sundowns arm had been broken.

"Take it away, Steamboat!" McCrackin was grinning from ear to ear now. "I think we can soon shut the door an' maybe drown out some of the unholy noise they're makin' out there."

"They won't stop for nothin', stranger." The gray-bearded cattleman hurried forward to help with the closing of the doors. "A quick kill-off of every old-timer in these parts is what they're aimin' for."

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McCRACKIN looked at him with a scowl as they threw the last bar across the doors. "Wasn't all yuh dudes gettin' ready to walk-out, anyhow? Or get a job herdin' sheep for the gang who took yuh over? I'm told yuh ain't been paid for a third of the cattle they've took away from yuh. That sounds bad to me."

"Paid for, hell!" snarled the cattleman. "I'm Bill Prince, one-time owner of the Flyin' Hawk, ten miles up the river. I ain't been paid for three thousan' head of the finest white-faces that ever trod a range. Others here are in the same fix. Ain't yuh heard that that Crazy River Bank across the street went bust wide-open?"

"An' yuh all think yuh owed it money, yeah," nodded McCrackin. "Maybe yuh have been in debt to it off an' on for thirty years or so. An' it had the Silver Falls Bank standin' behind it. The Silver Falls took over after yuh had a couple of nice hold-ups here. Hell, that ain't nothin' new. It's done many times a year all over the United States—an' sometimes Missouri, too! The big joke is that all yuh rich cowmen up here tried to go high-hoss.

"Ain't a big cowman or hossman in these parts who ain't got his name on them bank letterheads as vice-presidents an' directors. That made yuh responsible for anything what happened to the bank. The little fry among yuh didn't count. They was in debt an' could be taken over without trouble. Let's have a drink. I see somebody's struck a light."

"I'll take a drink; maybe two," Prince turned and followed him back to the bar, "but I'd ruther not hear any more about vice-presidents an' directors. An' just thinkin' of them sheep comin' burns me up."

"Wait a minute." McCrackin caught the man by the arm and whispered in his ear. "Why not stop them sheep from ever gettin' here?"

"There's been talk of that," admitted Prince, "but how the hell can it be done?"

"Ever hear of dynamitin' a railroad bridge?"

"We've thought of that," nodded the cattleman. "Even have the dynamite right at hand, but with so many guards all around, how can it be done?"

"With a little guts," grinned McCrackin. "Let's have that drink."

The shooting had suddenly let up. With window shutters and doors closed, no light could show outside. The three gunmen who were dragged in had been thoroughly hammered into submission. Robbed of their fighting tools they were a sick-looking trio.

"What we need," decided McCrackin as he poured a drink, "is a mite of salvation durin' the lull what's come on outside. I see we have dudes watchin' out for us at the back an' front of the room. Would yuh boys mind accommodatin' us?" His eyes were like gimlets as he looked at Sundown Jack. "I once heard that yuh had a mighty fine voice, Sundown. How about bouncin' us off a few verses of *Old Time Religion?* It's a right nice song."

"I know you now, Bill McCrackin." Sundown's eyes were like those of a wild animal driven into a corner. "I would have recognized you at once if I had noticed your whip. But when I sing for you it'll be in hell—with your hide stretched on a hot rock!"

"Yuh despair me." McCrackin downed his drink, and stepped away from the bar. "If yuh know anything about me, then yuh *might* know about how I can handle one of these things." He allowed his whip to come rolling off his shoulder. "Catch 'em, boys, an' sorter stretch their pants good an' tight across that stove. I'll play a tune on their set-down territory if they can't sing."

"Listen to me, McCrackin!" Sundown held up his hand. "Listen I tell you! If you touch me with that whip again I'll kill you. I'll kill you anyway before we're out of this mess. You're a trouble hunter. You had no business in this. You had no money or cattle involved. You horned in as the usual rowdy, taking the down-dog's side, but this is one time you let yourself in on something you won't horn your way out of. You came here only to die. An' I'm the huckleberry to see that you will!"

"Lis'en, *Mister* Sundown," McCrackin's voice was cold. "I did come here to let myself in on a deal. An' when I set down on such things I generally stay settin' until the war's over. I didn't come for pay, an' I don't shoot men for money! Let's have a song to break the quiet."

"Let's see you make me!" Sundown Jack bellowed.

"All right! Sing, damn yuh!" The whip really answered the man. An inch in front of the man's face it seemed to become an exploding .45. Sundown went backward, hands flying to his face. He was unhurt, but the popping of the whip appeared to have addled him. He staggered, clutched the bar, his eyes wide.

"Sing, damn yuh, sing!" bawled McCrackin. "I'll pull yore eyeballs together if yuh don't!"

"Wait!" Patch McQuirt threw up his hands. "Sundown maybe—maybe don't know the words. Me—me an' Dode Pardon will—will sorter lead out for 'im! Ready, boys?"

CHAPTER THREE

Bridge Out!

OUTSIDE the Crazy River Saloon, Sheriff Hank Hardy turned to his deputy. "What in damnation's going on in the bar?"

"Don't know, Hank. Sounds like an old-fashioned revival, I'd say, only the singin's off-key an' sorter cracked."

Hardy and Walker White, his big chief deputy, were squatted in complete hiding on the flat false-fronted roof of the public stables across the street. Neither man yet knew just what had happened behind the Crazy River Saloon, but save for that singing the dead-quiet had again been restored, and everything was exactly in the shape Hank Hardy had told his gunmen he wanted it.

The cattlemen and their cowboys had been trapped. They were inside the saloons on either side of the street. Every door of those places had been barred, and Hardy's gunmen were watching them from perfect hiding places, both behind them and in front. If a single door opened it would be blasted full of buckshot to drive the crowds back and keep them every man a prisoner until the fight died a natural death, or starvation drove them out a few at a time with their hands up.

By the mid-morning, or noon at the latest, the cattle would be loaded. All plans for that big job had been made weeks in advance. The coming cattle trains would bring swarms of extra men to help those already on hand.

The sheep the trains were bringing would do the rest.

The cattlemen of the Crazy River Country were old-timers when it came to hating sheep. Most of them had been through cow and sheep wars. If there was any good about a sheep, not one of them was able to see it. The sight of sheep spreading over their once-fine rangelands would hit them harder than a half-dozen funerals in each family.

Hank Hardy felt no conscience pangs about it. For eleven years these people had elected him to office and had kept him there. It was the old story. Once elected it had become a habit for him to be re-elected. Public feeding and public watering could make a man rich and lift his ambitions for more and more riches. He was a man who had mounted the boxes and wagon-tongues to preach Four-Square Law and Order and Equal Rights for All Men. His slogan had been a go-getter — Hank Hardy, Hard-Hitting, Hammer-Headed Honesty Holder!

Bridger J. Bridger, the town banker, had been a man to tie to, although rather dumb when it came to putting over a good idea. Hank Hardy had been the one to see the possibility of a grand reorganizing of the bank. From a jerkwater establishment doing a yearly slow-poke business, he had shown where it could be turned into a whirlwind institution with every rich horse and cowman in the country behind it.

Its depositors had been led into the scheme like ducks to a millpond. Two of them had actually bought hard hats and clawhammer coats to wear when they came to town to sit in at the meetings of the board of directors.

Their words were good, always had been, and they had been proud to become uplifting citizens banded together for the benefit of the country. And they were down there now, all barricaded in, and minus of about everything but their tempers, their suspender buttons, and some credit left in the saloons.

The jail was jammed full of other cattlemen and cowboys, too. They were the unruly ones, the most dangerous. One by one and in pairs they had been picked up before the big drive-off of the cattle on the rangelands had taken place.

The arrests had been like rounding up

wild men and driving them to cages. It had taken some killing, but a man finished a job when he started it in this country. Only a few had escaped the corraling, and they were keeping out of town, living like wolves in the holes of the surrounding hills.

Hardy wanted to laugh as he moved back along the center of the roof of the stables. Walker White followed him, always the faithful pup at his heels, and stood guard with a Winchester as Hardy made his way down to the ground on a ladder.

The sheriff peered cautiously around them as White came down to the ground beside him. "I think a good stiff drink might go good right now."

"Two of 'em would be better," nodded White. "An' come to think of it, three wouldn't hurt. I admire yuh, Hank. Yo've got this thing sewed up tight, an' old Banker Bridger J. was scared. They say Solomon was smart, but I'd give four drinks right now to have 'im call yore hand."

They moved on quietly around the side of the stables. The street was still like a graveyard, every door still covered. They crossed the bridge. There was no fear of gunfire suddenly belching forth and upon them now. They could relax and take it easy.

At the jail they found four guards outside and Bridger J. Bridger alone inside waiting for them. He was a downcast man, very short, very round-bellied. His hard hat lay on the desk before him.

He had been dabbling at the Whiskey barrel on a chair in the corner, and whiskey and Bridger J. Bridger did not go together. His face had become ashen and streaked with cold perspiration. His usually stiff-as-a-plank collar was down.

"Go on and say it!" snapped the sheriff, beginning on the man before he had a chance to open his mouth. "You never did a dishonest thing in your life! This thing is hurting you, it's killing you, eating your heart out. Your lovely, high-haired daughter will never forgive you—and so on, and so on. Sit down and take the dying wad off its feet! We've done the impossible, Bridger. It's all sewed up tight."

The banker looked like he was about to explode. "Sit down, yourself. I'm as resigned to this thing as a once-honest man can be. There's a telegram on the desk for you."

Hardy turned to the desk and picked up the telegram. He ripped it open, and scowled as he read:

JUST NOW LEARNED THAT BULLWHIP BILL MCCRACKIN HEADED FOR CRAZY RIVER STOP ABSOLUTE POISON

SETH

"Bullwhip Bill McCrackin?" The sheriff looked up, scowling. "Yes, I know of that duck. He wiped up Dude City not so long ago. . . . This feller who came in on that white horse was carrying a bullwhip. He went from the stables to Dutch Charley's Café, then into the Crazy. I wonder now," he was suddenly on his feet, "if that bird thinks he can pull another Dude City job on us? Why, I'll hang him to the highest limb I can find, and—and—"

But at that moment speech died in his throat.

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A GREAT, bursting flare of light filled the night up the street. It shook Crazy River from one end to the other. Aheels of that first explosion came another, then a third. Dust started boiling skyward in front of the Crazy River Saloon.

Hardy looked out the window and saw it in the bursting gunfire that followed the tremendous sounds. In an instant it looked as if every doorway and window had become alight with stabbing flames

and rolling reports of a fierce battle breaking all over the town.

"That—was dynamite, Hank!" Walker White's voice jerked through the room as a muffled sound of cheers lifted from back inside the jail. "The Wolf Creek Kid's in on this! I told yuh three days ago dynamite had been stolen from that powder house up the river!"

"Hank Hardy was already grabbing a repeating shotgun off the wall. "Out with that light! You guards watch your step. Better get up on the third floor where you can take them from all sides if they hit here. Hurry, you fools! Good God, what's that?"

A staggering man had come racing across the bridge. Blood poured from the sides of his face. It was Sundown Jack. He plunged into the room, skidded around on one heel, and fell to the floor. Cursing in a gasping voice he came up, at once heading for the whiskey barrel.

"They got Dode and Patch!" he snarled, trying to draw himself a drink in a tin cup. "That damned Bullwhip Bill—made us sing. Split the seat of—of my pants out with his whip! He went up through the skylight on his whip to the roof. The others opened one of the front doors and made us run for it. The boys thought we were the cow-crowd breaking cover. Dode Pardon and Patch McQuirt were killed by our own gang, before we could make ourselves known. Gimme a shotgun!"

"But who's throwing the dynamite?" barked the sheriff.

"Bullwhip Bill McCrackin!" Sundown had downed his drink in four enormous gulps. "The two Bailey brothers had it. Got a couple of cases of it behind the bar in the Crazy River."

"Then the Wolf Creek Kid hasn't yet showed up!"

Hardy swung again to the front door. Just as he reached it another one of those earth-shaking explosions filled the night. Now a rending and crashing of planks came with it. A great mass of splinters filled the air over the river. The old wagon bridge had been struck. As more dynamite struck it the bridge disappeared in the dust, going down into the deep bed of the river.

"On the roof!" cried the sheriff, bringing up his shotgun and opening fire. "On the roof of the stables! How the hell did the bullwhip man get there so quick!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullwhip Takes the Throttle

BULLWHIP BILL McCRACKIN was not the only one who had hauled himself up to the roof of the Crazy River Saloon with his bosom full of sticks of dynamite furnished him by the two gray-headed bartenders. Bill Prince had followed him.

Behind Prince had come Steamboat Jackson, a cowboy by the name of Buck Hall, Tom Flint and Jughead Peterson. Once on the roof they had slipped apart, spreading to the right and left while the three prisoners below had been held against the front doors with six-shooters in their backs.

Tom Flint and Jughead Peterson had followed McCrackin. Moving toward the bridge, McCrackin had lowered the two men on his whip from the roof of the Crazy to the lower roof of a small saddle shop next door, and had come sliding down behind them.

Another smashing novel by Tom Roan, author of the Bullwhip Bill stories, will appear in the March issue! You'll want to know that tough-handed old-time cowman, Bullet Bill Cantrill, who defied a rustler regiment alone—with only one bullet left! Buy your copy of the March issue February 4th!

From the saddle shop they had gone on to a still lower roof of a small warehouse perched right on the brink of the bend of river. Through low willows, brush and rocks they had made their way down to the water's edge, keeping to it until they had passed under the bridge. Then they had climbed up in the darkness with the aid of the whip again to the rear corner of the livery stable.

McCrackin had not yet touched fire to one short fuse of the fourteen sticks of dynamite he was carrying in his shirt. Peterson and Flint had gone on to the roof of the stables. As the bridge went out with a roar, McCrackin was just reaching the door of the stall where he had left old Gabriel's Trumpet. Before he could lift the latch on the door, running feet close against the front of the stable drove him back.

Two men came bolting into the stable, each carrying a shotgun. They swung back into the apparent safety of the darkness as the street shook and a rattling shower of splinters and broken planks from the bridge filled the air from the second charge of dynamite hurled upon it.

"I told Hank about that damn' powder house!" The voice of one of the crouching men came in frightened sobs. "I don't like this kind of fightin', Lip. Any cock-eyed fool knows yuh can't fight dynamite with a sixgun!"

"Nor with shotguns," agreed the second man. "I wouldn't want no part fightin' it with a cannon. Hank's been too bold in this job, an' nobody's been able to tell 'im a thing."

Both men had their backs to McCrackin. His whip had slid off his shoulder. He was already slipping his old silver peso on the rawhide lash of it, making the whip a deadly weapon. He suddenly sent it uncoiling like a glistening snake shooting through the air.

"What's the matter, Lip?" The first man who had spoken leaped to one side in alarm as something *plunked*. His companion pitched forward on his face in the hallway without so much as a grunt of pain. "What—what—?"

Again there was that lightning *plunk!* It caught the second man on the head as it had caught the first, and there was power enough in the blow to knock a bull down.

The man spun around on his heel, shotgun flying out of his hands. He was down, flat on his back in the hallway with his legs sprawled apart and his arms thrown out at either side.

"'T'won't do," grinned McCrackin, coiling his whip back on his arm with a few swift, rolling flips as he moved forward, "for some people to monkey with guns. They're kind of dangerous at times. Apt to go off unexpected an' jar somebody."

He whipped the hands of the unconscious men behind their backs, then felt along the wall to find a rope to bind them in place and knot gags in their mouths before dragging them back into a dark stall.

Dynamite was still going off. It seemed that thousands of shots were blazing in all directions, sounding like the popping of small firecrackers against the heavy detonations of the dynamite.

"Easy!" called out a voice behind McCrackin as he turned toward his horse's stall. "It's us—Tom an' Jughead. Can't stay on the roof no more. They opened up on us from the jail like jackasses kickin' down tin stables. Rifle balls an' buckshot up there's thick enough to comb yore hair."

"Look—*look* out there!"

★

JUGHEAD was behind Tom Flint. He was pointing out the rear end of the hallway toward the little depot and the great dark sea of cattle pens

along the railroad tracks. "There's hell to pay back there for some reason! Looks like the guards are fightin' among 'emselves!

"No, damn it, I know what it is!" added the man after a pause to catch his breath. "Listen, Tom, somebody's hittin' them cattle pens an' beatin' off the guards while we're playin' hell here. Hear that!"

"Yee-ee-hoo-hoo! Drunk as fiddler's hound—an' so are you!"

The cry was like the fierce scream of some wild animal in the night. It came again, a second and a third time. From the direction of the jail, voices screeched and wailed back at it through the barred windows of cells. Others came, more muffled than those of Hank Hardy's prisoners in jail, and from men at bay inside the saloons up and down the street. An old fire bell *clang-clanged* as if to add its voice to the cheering, until concentrated gunfire stilled its brassy voice.

"Yee-ee-hoo-hoo!" raged back the voice in the direction of the cattle pens as the shots there grew into an inferno. "Drunk as a fiddler's hound—an' so are you!"

"It's the Wolf Creek Kid!" cried Peterson. "Listen to that little wolf sing!"

"Come on!" ordered McCrackin. "An' more power to yore wolf! There's a job we started out to do. We've got to make it to that engine settin' at the head of the tracks!"

McCrackin's first intention had been to try a desperate charge on old Gabriel's Trumpet through the hidden gunmen filling the town. Now he led the way on foot, and they had scarcely cleared the rear end of the hallway before shots were tearing at them from the darkness.

It was a race here of three hundred yards in the open to the depot through both the lead of friend and foe, because it was too dark for any one to tell who was who. Shots opened up on them even from the swarm of men fighting off the guards at the cattle pens.

McCrackin stumbled and went down. In the hail of lead whistling all around them his two companions wheeled back and helped him up. He limped from a terrific pain in his left ankle. It grew worse and the lead grew thicker as they reached the depot with a slowly steaming locomotive another forty yards ahead of them.

Horsemen were racing toward them now. It was part of the Wolf Creek Kid's gang trying to cut them off. When they reached the engine and climbed into the cab the men were right on them.

"She's still got enough steam to get her rollin'!" cried McCrackin as he dragged himself into the engineer's seat. "Hold yore hats an' pray like hell for me to head 'er out the right way!"

The engine was already facing down the main line track. The watchman who kept up the steam was nowhere in sight, and they thought he had been driven from his post to take shelter in the depot from the firing.

McCrackin switched the air valve to the right and left. He remembered that the lever at his right was the reverse. He hauled that back in place, and then surged against the throttle.

"Lie down!" he bawled as the drivers groaned and started to move with steam hissing and squirting from the cylinder heads. "We don't want to fight yore friends!"

"Ease up, Kid!" Jughead Peterson was finding brains enough at last to start yelling to the horsemen plunging up and around the engine. "We ain't Hardy folks! *Yee-ee-hoo-hoo!"*

"An' who are *you?"* sang back a voice out of the whipping shots and the splattering lead. "Sing out, damn you!"

"It's me!" Peterson abandoned all caution and leaped upon the coal pile in the tender. "It's Jughead—*Jughead!* We're on our way to stop them cow trains from comin' in!"

"Jughead!" bawled back voices. "Let

up, everybody, an' let Jughead go through! *Yee-ee-hoo-hoo!* Drunk as a fiddler's hound—an' so are you!"

Woo-oo-whoo-hoo-hoo! McCrackin was sawing on the whistle cord like a monkey gone crazy with a mirror. "Save me a dram of what yo're drinkin', but get the hell outa the way an' let this tomcat tom!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Fire in the Mountains!

NEITHER McCrackin nor his companions knew a confounded hoot about firing a locomotive. It was more or less luck that Bullwhip Bill McCrackin managed to get it rolling, but they were not long in finding a fireman.

As they passed the last hail of lead blazing at them from the scattering guards along the cattle pens, they heard a clang of a heavy iron lid being thrown back behind them on the tender, and a dripping figure came crawling up out of the water tank.

It was the night watchman, a hatless, pop-eyed man perched there like a bullfrog on the coal pile on his hands and knees. He looked to the right as if trying to pick a place to jump. Jughead Peterson caught him by the collar, bringing the man and rolling coal in an all-together slide down on the apron of the locomotive.

Even then, the man turned to jump, but Tom Flint seized him by the arm, whirled him around, and drove the muzzle of a six-shooter into the pit of his stomach.

"Whoa up!" ordered the cowboy. "Yuh ain't got wings, have yuh? Stick around an' join the circus. Somethin' tells me yo're a man we can use. Get that shovel an' show us how to bail coal in this thing."

"You—you'll jump the track at the first curve!" wailed the watchman. "This thing ain't got wings either. Ease up on that throttle!"

"Which," demanded McCrackin, "is the throttle an' which ain't? Oh, yuh mean the start-an'-stop-'er!"

He eased up on the throttle a few notches. The watchman dived to him a moment later and seized the air valve, slowing the engine's furious speed as the wheels started screaming on the rails of the sharp curve.

"Yuh do mighty well." Jughead Peterson patted the man on the back. "In fact, brother, I'm beginnin' to believe yo're *good*. Bein' a railroad man, maybe yuh can tell us where we can expect to meet the first one of them cowtrains comin' up from the Falls?"

"You'll meet it in hell, the way you're travelin'!"

"If we do," nodded McCrackin, "yo'll meet it with us. What's the matter, don't yuh like our company?"

"Hell, no!" barked the watchman. "I don't want to go to jail for stealin' a railroad engine!"

"Which goes to show yuh ain't got no pride," grinned Tom Flint. "This is what's called a public-spirited movement, I mean. Back there Hank Hardy's stealin' whole mountains, valleys an' canyons, to say nothin' of a first class river, lots an' lots of cows an' a few dozen cricks. Before he's done, he won't bother just takin' a lokymotive. He'll take the whole damn railroad, an' maybe have yuh, yore wife an' kids to herd sheep for 'im. . . . "Say, ain't yuh the fella who drinks with us Saturday nights in the Crazy?"

"Well—well, yes," admitted the watchman. "I'm Jasper Fuddy. It's goin' to be hard on me to have to get on a stand an' swear agin you in court—"

"Whoa up!" cut in Peterson, slowly pulling a big black .45 from its holster. "This is goin' to hurt me, but I've read where dead men tell no tales."

"That's right," nodded McCrackin with a broad grin. "Shoot 'im an' pitch 'im in the firebox, an' he won't have to go to

court. That's the best way to get rid of a witness."

"Don't—don't do it!" Fuddy held up his hands. "Yuh know damn' well nobody on this whole railroad line likes Hank Hardy. I'll help you run this thing. An' as far as knowin' you, either one of you—well, I never saw you before in my life. Yes, I'll take that back. I did see three men. Didn't know their names, but I will know at the trial that they had been workin' for Hank Hardy. Pass me that shovel, an' if you'll lift the lid on that fireman's seat you'll find a gallon jug of whiskey. I'm scared an' I'm cold."

"Sugar boy," yelled Tom Flint, catching the man by both ears and giving him a smacking kiss on the forehead, "ain't yuh just too sweet to be without wings!"

"He's got wings!" McCrackin cracked the throttle back another notch and looked down at them with a grin. "Why, I could see 'em flappin' when he was slidin' down that coal pile. Open that box. I'm sorter cold myself, an' maybe a dram'll do my sprained ankle good."

★

JASPER FUDDY could handle an engine. A few drinks of whiskey took the chills out of him and warmed his memory. He remembered after the fourth drink that Hank Hardy and his big deputy had thrown him in jail a number of times. His nose was crooked from a blow Hardy had once landed in his face with a six-shooter. And Deputy Walker White had beaten him senseless no less than three times with a blackjack.

"If it hadn't been for Hardy, I'd be somebody," he grumbled as he helped with the firing, the handling of the water in the boiler and the running of the engine at the same time. "I'd be pullin' a train on this jerkwater line. But Hank Hardy got me in bad with the road."

He moved back up beside McCrackin. "It's stoppin' the cow trains that you want. We'll hit Swingin' Bridge just about the time the first double-header comes over Stonewall Pass. I can show you how we can wreck this engine at the sidetrack just beyond the bridge. The cow trains will all have to back up to Silver Falls to let the wrecker through. It'll tie up the line for at least a full day an' a night."

"Good!" agreed McCrackin. "Just let's keep this baby rollin' an' get to that bridge."

They came to it thirty miles south of Crazy River. Headlights were already showing on the high black walls of mountains ahead of them. The trestle was in the wildest section of the hills, where the mountains jumped into the sky.

Dark canyons fell away at every hand. The great wooden trestle itself spanned one of them with the waters of Crazy River roaring and spouting more than two hundred feet below the rails.

"Fires burnin' at each end of the bridge," growled McCrackin as the engine came around the bend. "What's it for? Guards?"

"That's right," answered Fuddy. "Hank Hardy an' his crowd's thought of everything. There's men at each end of the bridge with Winchesters. Don't stop, or it'll be a fight."

"That's what we come for," nodded McCrackin. "Yuh take this stop-an'-start-'er thing, an' do just what I say."

Fuddy took the seat, slowing the engine down as it neared the end of the bridge. McCrackin moved quickly back on the tender, his whip ready, the peso on the lash.

One man stood in the firelight ahead with a rifle in his hands. That man apparently saw no danger in an approaching engine. He waved up at Fuddy, crouched low in the cab window. A second later he must have thought the longest snake in the world had struck him. He reeled

backward, the rifle flying out of his hands and sliding down the slope.

"Keep goin'," ordered McCrackin. "It won't take much longer with the other fella."

But there were two guards at the other end of the bridge. They stood threateningly, six-shooters ready and determined to stop the engine or shoot the engineer.

Fuddy slowed down as if stopping, but he kept the engine moving just enough to keep the men in a trot as he came alongside of them. He allowed them to hop aboard, one after the other, but Jughead Peterson and Tom Flint were there hiding in the darkness of the tender. They brought their six-shooters down on the backs of the men's heads and dropped them like pole-axed bulls as they started to question Fuddy.

"An' now," ordered McCrackin, "just keep on a-rollin' around the bend to the sidetrack. Get to the upper end. Jughead, yo'll take down the switchlight an' set it in the middle of the track to stop that cow train. I ain't aimin' to kill any trainmen."

"But—but then what?" Excitement had cleared some of the whiskey in Fuddy's head, and he was getting scared again. "You fellas make my backbone crawl all over my shoulders. What—what are we goin' to do with these knocked out fellas?"

"Put 'em back there in the water tank!" answered McCrackin. "It was good enough for yuh, wasn't it? There's a way to lock the lid down back there, an' we'll sorter hang 'em up somehow so they won't drown. We're goin' to make a hero outa yuh, Fuddy. Goin' to get yuh a real job on this line before we're through!"

But Fuddy could not understand it. He was mumbling and looking popeyed when the lights were placed in the track, when the engine was backed back down to start the work on the bridge. Tom Flint remained aboard the engine as it backed on across the bridge to pick up the unconscious man there and put him in the water tank to join the other two of Hardy's guards.

When McCrackin and Peterson came hurrying across the bridge with smoke rising behind them Jasper Fuddy's eyes opened wider, and Tom Flint had to hold the jug to steady it while the man took three big swallows.

"Back up a little more!" ordered McCrackin, waving his hat. "Hell's goin' to pop!"

As he spoke a tremendous roar shook the trestle. It was followed by others, the timbers flying, debris filling the air, rails buckling like dying snakes. Fire was soon breaking out in a dozen places along the wrecked structure.

"Good Gawd," groaned Fuddy, "you—you're blowin' up an' burnin' up the bridge as well! This is worse'n stealin' the engine. They'll hang us for this!"

"No they won't, angel." McCrackin and Peterson came crawling back up in the cab. "They're goin' to give yuh a medal. Don't yuh catch on yet? Why, yo've got the three men who done this wreckin' job! They're back there swimmin' around in cold water an' wishin' they was in a nice, warm jail. They're the same three dudes who grabbed the engine in Crazy River an' made yuh drive out here! Yes, sir, they are!

"Two of 'em got knocked cold by flyin' rocks when shootin' the dynamite. Yuh got yore chance an' cold-decked the other'n with a monkey wrench. Yuh piled 'em in the water tank, latched down the lid—an' brought 'em back to justice! Ain't that right, Jughead?"

"Damn' if it ain't!" declared the cowboy. "Why, Jasper, I'll get at least forty witnesses to say they saw 'em grab the engine."

"It's Grick to me, fellas," shivered Fuddy, "I still don't understand it."

"Yuh will, before we get back to town," grinned McCrackin. "Crack yore

start-'er an' let's get goin' while Tom passes the jug. That bridge is a goner. They won't run a train over these tracks for six weeks, an' when they do yo'll be what they call the chief head of the hawg. Much obliged, Tom. Here's to the hero!"

CHAPTER SIX

Death's Stampede

FROM time to time Sheriff Hank Hardy's voice lifted in the outer edge of the grove surrounding the jail. All such things as short-range work for shotguns had come to an end. Rifles were the order now, in a furious attempt to help drive off the raiders on the cattle pens while the prisoners in the jail sang, prayed, cheered and pounded the walls to give encouragement to the Wolf River Kid and his crew of fighting gun-hawks.

Hank Hardy had been scared many times. His gunmen kept falling back, losing ground. But when it looked as if they were whipped, they changed the tide of the battle by a miracle. Twice the street had looked as if the fight was over, then the cattlemen had rallied.

The same thing had been taking place over there at the cattle pens. That gang attacking there seemed to have been driven off innumerable times only to return, fiercer, wilder and more desperate than before to take up where those devils under the Kid had been beaten off.

There was no man in the country Hank Hardy hated more than that infernal Kid. He was twenty-five, as sleek as a whip, daring to a degree of unbearable arrogance among his enemies, and a guitar-picking, song-singing knight of the campfires where his friends were concerned.

Hardy had wanted him, first of all, behind the bars. Old men followed the Kid. For three years—apparently blowing in from hot off an outlaw trail—he had ridden their worst horses, made his wild, rollicking music at their dances, and had become as much a bronc-peeler for one rancher as another. The Kid played no favorites.

And now he was out there, squalling his bronc-bursting yell, something that had become a by-yell in the Crazy Country. The fact that Hardy hated him so much was simply because he feared him.

As a sheriff who had always nailed down his man when he wanted him, Hardy had looked over every old and new wanted bulletin in his office. Once the

"LIVE BY THE SWORD"

June, 1497—and I, Gaspare Torella, stalked the streets of Rome possessed only of a sword, the clothes I stood up in, and my degree as a physician—valuable in that order. Then, suddenly, the clatter of steel on steel in the moonlight, blood staining the cobbles as a man's life ebbed away, a buffet on the pate that knocked me unconscious and—a rude awakening next morning to find myself personal physician to Cesare Borgia—the Duke of Hell!

Don't miss this swashbuckling four-part novel of Renaissance Italy, by F. R. Buckley—beginning in February *Adventure.*

In this same issue: "Lord Tiger of Tonkin," by Georges Surdez, a long novelette of the Foreign Legion—and of the mysterious Chanod, scourge of the Japanese in Indo-China; "The Fightin'est Yank," by Clifford Dowdey; "Feed the Hungry Stranger," by Howard Bloomfield; Tom Roan's "Jambi," a tale of head-hunters along the Amazon; "Fire-Bringer," by John Murray Reynolds—and the usual features found only in *adventure.* On sale Now!

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sheriff had arrested him for riding an outlaw horse down the street that had turned into a bucking cyclone one Saturday afternoon. Before he could get him halfway to the jail, cattlemen had made a teeming crowd around the Kid to go his bond.

"We might still cross the wreckage of that bridge." Hardy spoke now to his big chief deputy. "We're cut off from the ford—"

"An' from a lot of other things, Hank," cut in Walker White. "It's beginnin' to look sorter bad news to me. If we started across that bridge we'd be shot before we got halfway over. It's that dynamite what's done it. The boys just can't face it, an' it seems now that the cow-crowd on both sides of the street are holdin' the roofs. Wonder why that engine pulled out so fast?"

"Don't know," scowled the sheriff, "but it's all right. The engine probably went down the line to help the first cattle train over Stonewall Pass. It can't mean anything against us. Hell, nobody in the railroad gang would dare buck me now."

White shook his head. "I don't like it. That bullwhip fella blows in, all hell busts loose, an' then in hops the Wolf Creek Kid."

"When the first train rolls in, you'll see the change!"

"I'm seein' some change now." White lifted a big hand to point to the cattle pens. A haze of light from the late moon was just beginning to glow over the great hills in the east.

By its glow they could see that the cattle-pen guards were still trying to hold their own. They were hiding in the rocks and brush. Some of them were actually crowded in among the terrified cattle, fighting back from there.

But something was happening over there now. Horses had been shot from under some of the Wolf Creek Kid's men. The dismounted men were down in the rocks and bushes, making it a battle of snakes-in-the-grass after snakes-in-the-grass.

In the pale light Hardy saw two men break cover and start running down the tracks. When he saw them throw up their hands and go down it was almost a certainty they were his own gunmen.

"Look!" Walker White was still pointing. "Good God, Hank, the pens are bein' opened and cows are coming out! They—they're tryin' mighty hard for that stampede!"

Hardy held his breath. Dark streaks were beginning to pour like streams from the pens. The cattle came out like running rivers of oil. They merged, spreading fan-wise. Here and there the white face of a steer showed in the growing light. A noise like a mountain beginning to move sounded above the crashing of the shots. Through it came that terrible, squalling cry that had become like sandpaper rubbing Hank Hardy's ear drums:

"Yee-ee-hoo-hoo! Drunk as a fiddler's hound—an' so are you!"

Waugh! Waugh! Woo-oo-whoo-hoo-hoo! bawled back another voice from faraway down the railroad tracks. With it came the faint shuffling sound that was a locomotive coming, hell-on-wheels with light from its firebox door glowing against the sky as some one bailed in the coal.

"Now, by God, they're licked!" cried Hardy. "A cattle train at last!"

"I ain't so shore about it." Walker White's voice was mournful. "That engine's just topped Coyote Hill. It looks like what they call runnin' loose to me, just like it went out of here. An' look on beyond it, Hank! Up there on the side of the Stonewalls! It looks like the mountains burnin' down to me—an' by Gawd it is! It—it's either a cattle train afire, or Swingin' Bridge is burnin' down!"

Another dynamite explosion shook the earth. This time it came from the direction of the mile-square corral to show that

some of the men from the Crazy River Saloon had slipped through the lines. Barb wire twanged. From many places along the side of the corral those ugly dark streaks started pouring.

Again there was a noise like a mountain beginning to move. Cattle bawled. Horns knocked, tapping like rattling bones in the night. The living flood was beginning to move. Half-mad longhorns were coming, going, spreading in all directions.

In another flare from exploding dynamite, horsemen who had cut the fence in dozens of places hugged low over their saddles and rode hard to keep from going down under the crashing seas of hoofs behind them.

"It's pray to God now cowboy!" groaned the deputy. "Pray that there ain't no holes ahead an' yore pony's feet stays on the ground!"

"Pray yourself, fool!" cried the sheriff. "Run back to the jail! Look at all those cattle pouring our way!"

"Yce-ee-hoo-hoo!" mocked a voice flinging out of the noise and the night like the laughter of a ghost. "Drunk as a fiddler's hound—an' so are you!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bullwhip Bill—Hero-Maker!

A GREAT quiet settled as Jasper Fuddy brought the old engine toward the end of the line, but as the puffing of the locomotive died away a sound filled the air that was like something seething; rocks sliding, drums tapping and glass rattling.

Cattle were everywhere. Every guard had been routed from the cattle pens and the big corral on the other side of the river. Fuddy had to stop the engine before he reached the end of the line because two of Hank Hardy's dead gunmen were lying sprawled across the tracks.

"Now just use yore head," ordered McCrackin as he buckled a big pair of six-shooters and their heavy belts around the watchman. "The big 'un with the wart on his chin back there in the tank wore these fightin' tools. Talk big an' act big when the time comes. From the looks of things, that won't be long."

The spreading cattle kept them on the engine for twenty minutes. It was a grand conglomeration here. Brands were being hopelessly mixed. It would take weeks to untangle them and find out whose cattle were here and whose were there, but it made little difference. Those cattle were heading back, and hundreds of them would instinctively find their way back to their own rangelands. The others would be cut out in the fall round-ups, and things would be as they had been if Hank Hardy was whipped to a standstill.

"He's still got the law on his side," growled Tom Flint, staring at the scattering herds. "He had court orders to pick up all them cows an' order us off the ranges."

"Yeah, I do know," nodded McCrackin. "Yuh can always get a court order from the right kind of a judge, an' he can be found most anywhere a lawyer or two is found hidin' in the bushes. Let's worry about that when we come to it. What's that thing out there that seems to be tryin' to worry itself to death on the ground?"

"It's one of the big rain-barrels from over against the depot," answered Jasper Fuddy. "Cattle must have turned it over."

"An' now they're knockin' it around," grinned McCrackin, scratching his ear. "But it ain't alone, that barrel. It's got a man inside it. Let yore engine ooze back down the line a little. The barrel's goin' to hit the tracks."

The engine moved gently, and the cattle shied away from it. They broke into a scattering run when Fuddy had a better idea and blew the whistle. With space cleared around it, the barrel came to a

(Continued on page 132)

Up the Trail

WE'VE talked before about the strong, primitive virtues of courage, loyalty, self-reliance or just plain ornery fighting guts that were part and parcel of the Old West, and shared alike by determined men and women throughout the frontier. For our money, though, it was the old-time cowman who stood most in need of high physical courage. He had to have it—in order to exist in the remote up-and-down ranges of the untamed West.

We were thinking of that when we picked up a novel by Tom Roan, which will be published in the next issue, and first met old Bullet Bill Cantrill—a tough, two-fisted rancher in a land noted for its tough fighting men. For Bullet Bill was dying true to form, alone, and fighting until the last minute up there in what cattlemen called the Top-of-the-World Country.

Folks had always said that Bullet Bill would die somewhere in a rock pile or a ravine, fighting it out to the bitter end with a gang of rustlers pouring it into him from all sides. And he was in a rock pile now. There were rustlers all around, and they had him where they wanted him—alone, at bay, with not a whisper of a chance.

The last shell in his bullet-scarred old Marlin had been fired. Only one cartridge remained in his six-shooters. There had been two at the last check-up, but he had fired one of them, quick and sure, to end the misery of his horse, lying out there and slow-dying in the blood-red sunset.

Bullet Bill nodded with a hard, blue gleam in his eyes. It wouldn't be long now, but the one shot he had left would show them what side he was on when the lights were going out for him. There'd be no powder-burn from his own gun on that bald head or on the leathery face with its clipped gray mustache. When people talked about this fight, they would say that William B. Cantrill had killed a rustler with his last bullet, and then went down trying to hammer their heads in with his silent guns, like a mauling grizzly making its last stand.

"Must be at least a dozen of 'em," he told himself. "I said when I heard they was workin' the country again that it would be a big pack of 'em this time."

A bullet whistled and slapped the rocks, sending down flying splinters. Cantrill nodded grimly. They were starting up again.

He laid back, holding his six-shooter across his belly. There'd be a grand charge on the rock-pile any minute now. It had been too long since he had done any real shooting. They knew he was out of shells. They were smart, those fellows.

But Bullet Bill, after standing there, spitting in Death's eye for all that desperate red afternoon, was due for a break in luck. . . .

Cantrill was thinking of a lot of things when all those racing horsemen came toward him, with their bullets cutting hell among the daisies in the rocks. Then another sound, blowing up like thunder from the rim, startled him. Something was going wrong! The rustlers were yelling, their horses turning in confusion.

Someone, he reckoned, had come at last. Someone who could throw lead so fast it reminded him of the beating hoofs of stampeding cattle along a rocky trail. . . .

Later, when the smoke cleared away, and Bill stood up, blood flowing from half a dozen bullet-nicks, he saw his unknown champion.

"Howdy," he nodded. "There ain't no need of saying I'm glad yuh come when yuh did. I was sort of in a bad fix here. It would have been all over but the shoutin', I reckon, if you hadn't come along."

"It possibly would." The young stranger smiled for the first time. "I saw it from back there. If I'm any judge of a fight, you ran out of shells." The young fellow nodded toward one of the raiders' horses, and tossed him the reins. "I never ask questions. I can spare you a few shells and there's a couple of cans of beans in my saddle pockets."

Cantrill's eyes narrowed. "And along of that," he said, "I reckon I ain't never seen you, an' you ain't never seen me?"

The stranger stiffened. Something like gathering powdersmoke came into his eyes. "I've never seen you," he assented. "And if you play your cards as I play mine, you haven't seen me."

Looking at the man, Cantrill was suddenly reminded of a wolf about to bare its fangs. "I take it," Cantrill said evenly, "you ain't much particular about our trails crossin' again?"

"I'd rather they would not," said the stranger, the danger smoke still in his eyes. "I never play my cards like you, and I don't trail with those who do. I can stand anything—but a thief!"

Who was this smoky-eyed youngster with the curious scar across his cheek who turned up just in time to save Bill's life? What was he to mean to that hard-fighting, lone-handed rancher? Would his coming—providential as it had seemed at the moment—bring even more blood and gunsmoke to that troubled range?

Tom Roan answers those questions in this novel which, in all its suspenseful drama and sweeping color, brings once more to life the spirit of the frontier. Also five other novels will be in the March issue, by Charles W. Tyler, Norrell Gregory, Robert E. Mahaffay, and others.

The March issue will be published February 4th!

DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," reveals the story of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The man, a well-known explorer and geographer, tells how he found these strange methods in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. He discloses how he learned rare wisdom and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which enabled many to perform amazing feats. He maintains that these immense powers are latent in all of us, and that methods for using them are now simplified so that they can be used by almost any person with ordinary intelligence.

He maintains that man, instead of being limited by a one-man-power mind, has within him the mind-power of a thousand men or more as well as the energy-power of the universe which can be used in his daily affairs. He states that this sleeping giant of

mind-power, when awakened, can make man capable of surprising accomplishments, from the prolonging of youth, to success in many fields. To that eternal question, "Do we have to die?" his answer is astounding.

The author states the time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world, and offers to send his amazing 9,000-word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 178E, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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If you have to get up 8 or more times a night your rest is broken and it's no wonder if you feel old and run down before your time. Functional rather than organic or systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles often may be the cause of many pains and symptoms simply because the Kidneys may be tired and not working fast enough in filtering and removing irritating excess acids, poisons and wastes from your blood. So if you get up nights or suffer from burning, scanty or frequent passages, leg pains, backache or swollen ankles, due to non-organic or non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles, you'll make no mistake in trying the prescription called Cystex. Because it has given such joyous, happy relief in so high a percentage of such cases, Cystex is sold under a guarantee of money back on return of empty package unless completely satisfactory to you. Cystex costs only 35c at druggists and the guarantee protects you.

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N.W. SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY, Dept. 3362, Omaha, Neb.

(Continued from page 129)

halt just below the big locomotive's cab.

A hatless man started crawling out of it, and there was enough moonlight now for McCrackin to recognize him. It was Sundown Jack. Before he knew that McCrackin was within a mile of him the deadly bullwhip had wrapped itself around his neck, and willing hands were hauling him up in the cab.

"Right welcome to our midst, Sundown," grinned McCrackin as the half-choked man had his six-shooters taken away from him for the second time during the night. "Just keep a gun in his ribs, boys, an' pitch 'im in the water tank with the rest of Mr. Fuddy's mess of fish."

"How'd you get here?" snarled Sundown.

"Just hopped on the engine a minute ago," lied McCrackin. "Had to get away from all them cows. Wait with 'im, boys. I want to talk to 'im for a minute. It's too bad to see yuh get hanged, Sundown, when I was shore I'd hear of yuh bein' shot."

"What do you mean by that, McCrackin?"

"Just what I said." McCrackin was watching him narrowly. "Hank Hardy thinks he's dyin'. Shot through the fleshy part of the belly. Bridger J. Bridger thinks he's dyin', too. They've shore put the hat on yuh about this mess. Much as I know yuh don't like me, I hate to see one man take all the blame, when I know he ain't *all* to blame. They say yuh robbed the bank a couple of times. They say the money stole from the bank was taken to the bank in Silver Falls—"

"They're liars!" snarled the breed. "I might have known they would be!"

"Double-crossin' yuh, just like I figured," McCrackin shook his head sadly. "Still they've got to have a billygoat for ever' job, an' they sometimes get suckers like yuh an' me to hang in their place. I'm sorry for yuh, Sundown, but the

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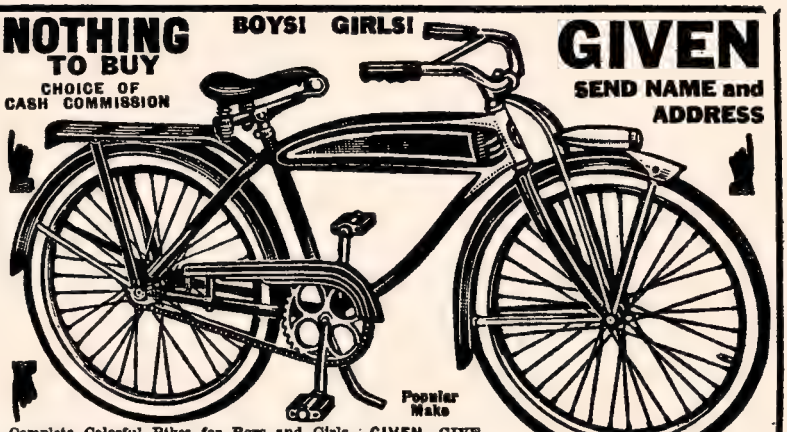

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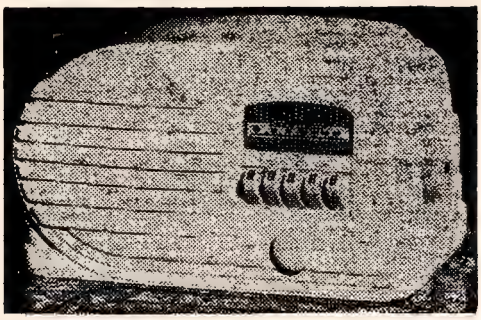

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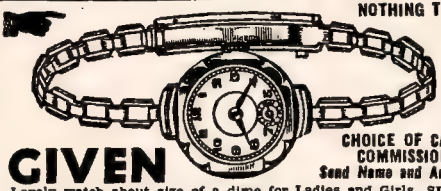

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whole town's full of deppity U. S. marshals who rid in just a little while ago."

He glanced at Jughead Peterson and Tom Flint, "It's plumb sad, but to save 'im misery yuh might just tie his hands behind 'im an' pitch' im to the mob."

"They'll not hang me to save Bridger and Hardy!" cried the breed. "There never was a real hold-up in the bank! It was all a fake. The money's in a secret hole under a slab of steel in the floor of the vault. They—Look here," he caught himself, "what are you trying to pull on me, Bullwhip Bill?"

"Nothin', Sundown." McCrackin grinned from ear to ear. "Not a thing. Don't get mad, honey. I've just got through pullin' it. Pitch 'im in the tank, boys. My ankle's hurtin' agin or I'd help yuh."

★

CLOSING in, tighter and tighter. Sheriff Hank Hardy could feel it. The cattle had scattered on from around the jail. His gunmen had been licked in a last hard burst of fighting. Now they were gone; those who could fleeing the town on horses snatched here and there, and others going it afoot. He saw Walker White turn and sneak toward a window.

"They're out there, Hank," whimpered the man. "I can see what looks like a million eyes starin' through the moonlight!"

Banker Bridger J. Bridger had grown quiet. He stood there with his back to the door of the jail. For some reason he looked like a mouse brought to bay and deciding at last to fight.

"Get away from that door, Bridger!" Hardy whirled on the man, one hand on the butt of a six-shooter. "Why, damn you, I'll kill you!"

"You can, if you want to!" The banker

FORTUNE IN CASH PAID FOR OLD MONEY

HIS "LAST DIME," yet if that dime was of the year 1894 with a mint mark "S" Max Mehl, the Texas Money King, would have paid him $100.00 for it. He could have been dining on steak instead of coffee and doughnuts.

COINS WORTH FORTUNES may pass through your hands unnoticed, if you do not know how to recognize them. Mrs. Harvey, wife of a Fulton, Mo., farmer was paid $140.00 for three small coins which she obtained as part payment for some produce.

IT PAYS TO BE POSTED—the owner of a number of $5.00 and $10.00 notes of the Kirtland (Ohio) Safety Society Bank was about to burn them, but hearing of Max Mehl, sent them to him and it was discovered they bore the signature of Joseph Smith, the late founder of the Mormon Church. They were, therefore, of considerable value.

ONE OF THE LARGEST TRANSACTIONS in the history of coins was the purchase by B. Max Mehl, the Texas Money King, of 832 copper cents from Dr. George P. French, of Rochester, for $50,000.00. Above is shown a newspaper picture of B. Max Mehl handing over the check. The coin illustrated is one of the pennies dated 1793. Three of these were valued at $5,000.00.

VALUABLE COINS turn up in the most unexpected places! A ticket seller on the Brooklyn Bridge took in a half dollar for which he later received $800.00. It pays to watch your coins!

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28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
32x5.00-19	2.75	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-16	3.75	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.55	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75

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lifted his hands. As he lifted them jail keys rattled on the floor behind him. "Yes," he actually smiled, "I've unlocked the door. For twenty years I was an honest man until you came along. You bullied me into this thing because you found out that I came to this country after serving ten years for a land fraud in Texas.

"You trumped up charges. You swore you would send me back. I'm not afraid any more, Hank Hardy. Look me in the eye for a moment, Hank." Slowly the little banker lowered his hands. He broke open the bosom of his shirt, baring his chest. "Now go ahead, and shoot."

"Damn you, *I will!*"

Hardy swung backward, six-shooter coming out of his holster, and a heavy Colt jarred the night from just outside the door.

The sheriff yelled, blood flying from his right hand where a bullet had shattered it and the bones of his wrist. The devil limped into the doorway then—a barrel bellied man gumming a chew of tobacco, wicked bullwhip asleep like a blacksnake on his shoulder, and the big Colt cradled in his right hand. He grinned.

"Just had to shoot one shot in yore show, Mr. Hardy." The grin widened on his face. "Wouldn't think I'd been in it if I didn't. The Wolf Crick Kid's out there sorter holdin' back the crowd." The big Colt slid back into its warn holster. "Sundown Jack's out there, too. Him an' three fellas who stole a railroad engine an' burned down a bridge. Ain't no sheep comin' to Crazy, Mr. Hardy. Ain't no cows goin' out. I knowed it'd be like this."

He cocked his head to one side like a wise old gander.

"How'd I know? you might ask. I'll tell yuh. Yore brother-in-law in Silver Falls tried to hire me last fall for one of them hold-ups. I had a job elsewhere. Then when I come through Silver Falls

this last time he tried to hire me to help finish up yore deal."

He turned to the banker. "The boys don't figure on hangin' yuh, Mr. Bridger. They need yuh to help square things up. They figure that two ways: There's the Wolf Crick Kid. He's in love with yore gal, in spite of her airish ways. The Kid's asked that yuh don't decorate a limb.

"Mr. Hardy, have yuh made yore last will an' testament?"

"I'll make it!" snarled the sheriff. "With my left hand!"

But the bullwhip was quicker. It shot forward, uncoiling black lightning striking. It caught the butt of the sheriff's six-shooter. The weapon was snatched out of its holster and hurled across the room. Even then Hardy tried to reach the Colt in his right holster.

Again the bullwhip was quicker. It slashed back, caught him by the wrist, and gave him a violent jerk that sent him scooting head-first out the door.

"Late, but not forgotten, Mr. White!"

Again the bullwhip went into action, and it was the last time. Walker White had been standing there, white-faced as a ghost. Both his hands tore up to his throat as the whip slashed around his neck. He was given one violent haul, and in a running fall he plunged out the door.

"They're cheerin' out there, Mr. Bridger." McCrackin grinned at the banker. "It ain't exactly for the hangin'. They're cheerin' Mr. Jasper Fuddy. I'm told yuh own a lot of stock in the railroad. If yuh have any pull when the boys get through—well, yuh might help Jasper Fuddy get a better job. Single-handed an' with only a monkey wrench, he arrested three men who burned down a railroad bridge. Jasper's a hero!"

With that he walked over to the whiskey barrel and drew himself a drink.

THE END

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(Continued from page 8)

of the greatest outfits in the Southwest. . . .

NOW we're all here on Phil's spread, outside of Mesa, Arizona, sitting on the top rail of the big breaking corral, and it's Sunday morning. The sun is bright and warm, and it sure is a lovely day. Right at the corner, hugging the post, is Calhoun Redfern, who came from Birmingham, where Amos and Andy came from. Next on his right sits the purtiest little gal I have laid an old-time wrangler's eyes on, from a little town in Michigan. On the other side of the ranny from Birmingham is a chap from Burlington, Vermont, named Jesse Cameron. Others perched on the top rail of the Augurin' Pen are Seth Burgess, of Oakland, California; Bradner Cartwright of Denver; Jean Carruthers of Lincoln, Nebraska; petite and blue-eyed Molly Fogerty of Butte, Montana; Everett Southern of Chicago; Chet Oper of Kay-See; Dudley Mitchell of Trenton, N. J.; Mabel Allen of Brooklyn; Edgar Farwell of Toledo; Charley Ransom of Cleveland; Lucile Worthington of San Francisco (only tenderfeet call it *"'Frisco!"*), Evelyn Birch of St. Louis; Jud Campbell of Bozeman, Montana; Jimmy Forsythe of Cincinnati, Ohio, and a lot of other folks.

The preliminaries are over with, and Calhoun Redfern cuts in by reading the letter he wrote me last month. Here it is:

Dear Old Wrangler:

During a recent trip through several Western states I heard not a little about 'nesters' wars'. Some of the stories I heard of trouble between nesters and range men were pretty savage. I think it was in the November edition of the *Star Western* there appeared a story by Walt Coburn entitled "Hell's Pitchfork Army" which particularly interested me.

I asked several old-timers in the West whether such things actually did occur. Will you be kind enough to tell me about this? And just why were there such tragedies?

Nesting first started with the establish-

ment of little homes in the West, by cowboys who "went soft," and quit ranching in order to build homes. For the most part these little structures—built of sod, logs or adobe, depending upon the available building material—were places where youngsters were raised by perhaps the most heroic, self-sacrificing and devoted mothers the world ever knew! Land was cheap, or it could be obtained at no cost merely by squatting on it.

True to their highest concept of life, gals wouldn't marry the cowboys unless they quit traipsing over the country—forking mustangs and broncs, riding on roundups, or going on trail drives. So what could the poor lads do but hang up their boots and saddles, and take to hoeing?

. . . Naturally, cowboys knew the districts in which they lived. They knew where were the water holes and the best land for agricultural purposes. So, when they squatted, they fenced the water holes. Obviously this interfered with the ranges which had been in the hands of cattlemen.

Then came settlers. These also fenced water holes. They filed on the best land they could find, further interfering with open range.

Old-time experienced cattlemen watched the coming of nesters—both one-time cowmen and settlers—with forebodings for yet another reason.

Knowing the West, and realizing the settlement of a country does not change wind conditions, and having had experience with land which had been put under a plow, they knew that, sooner or later, the fertile soil would be blown away, once the sod was disturbed. They realized that not only would the extent of the range be reduced, but the whole country would vanish as the result of windstorms, or be rendered worthless as the result of soil erosion due to floods following spring rains and the sweep of swollen streams.

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The rangemen first were annoyed and then embittered by the efforts of "nesters" to make of the West an "agricultural" country. . . . There were great herds of cattle which continued to roam the prairies. Sometimes these critters would invade a nester's farm, doing serious damage to growing crops.

This embittered the nesters—many of whom were aliens from oversea who knew nothing of the West, and its open-handedness—became sullen, jealous of their little domains. In course of time the cattlemen began fencing their lands. Often they included great sweeps of ter-

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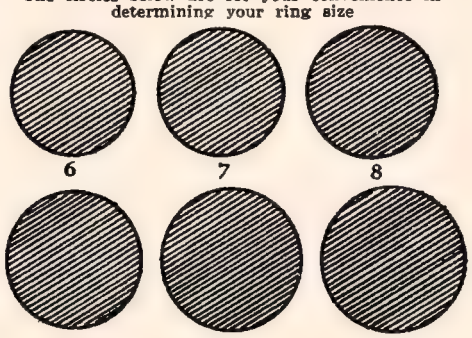

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ritory which would entirely envelop the nesters' plots, depriving them of natural rights-of-way.

Shut off from his usual road and, possibly his source of water supply, the nester became more embittered against the cowmen, who thoroughly reciprocated that feeling. Resentment came to be deadly hate. Finally, settlers overwhelmed the cattlemen by sheer power of numbers.

They came at first—in my time—by the hundreds. Then by the thousands; hundreds of thousands; millions.

No, my friend, Walt Coburn's story was *not* exaggerated! Of course everyone, who knows anything about Walt Coburn, knows that *he* knows his West! His characters are flesh-and-blood characters. My wonder is he makes them so human; so kindly.

JESSE CAMERON, of Burlington, Vermont, asks me to tell about the clothing worn by old-time cowboys. He stated in his letter that recently he read a story in which the principal character, depicted as a buckaroo, wore straight spurs, a nickel-plated six-gun carried in a "closed" holster, a light blue flannel shirt, leather leggin's over laced boots, a broad-brimmed felt hat with a low crown, and a neckerchief. The character also wore long gauntlets. . . . Was this typical of any part of the old West?

I cannot imagine any working cowpuncher ever appearing in such a rig as that! I have no idea who wrote the story to which Mr. Cameron refers, and certainly that individual never saw more of the West in any event, than can be seen through a car window.

The clothing worn by cowboys on the plains, assuredly was distinctive—as well as colorful—but it had its own very rigid conventions. As long ago as 1886, when I was a lad, in Topeka, I met a cowboy who previously had ridden on my father's

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spread in Colorado, and then became the owner of a ranch in Northern Texas. He proudly related to me that this outfit had cost him six hundred and ninety dollars down in San Antone. A heavy Mexican saddle inlaid with silver and filigreed; a silver-mounted bridle with enormous bit-braces, and spurs to match—almost as big as a man's hand; a high-crowned, broad-brimmed Stetson sombrero, gold-mounted; a forty-dollar saddle blanket, a twenty-dollar quirt and a leather lariat which cost thirty dollars; a Colt .45, which he said cost sixty-five dollars—pearl-handled and gold-mounted; a Winchester rifle and filigreed leather scabbard which set him back another ninety-five dollars; chaps of thick goat's wool; a yellow slicker which he said cost ten dollars, and a pair of gauntlets made of a yew's hide hand-embroidered, cost him fifteen dollars. His shirt was made of virgin wool cloth, fitted with pearl buttons. His boots were of top-layer kid, with flowered fronts, and heels higher than those on women's French slippers.

And yet he wasn't what you might call a dandy. Nothing dudish about his rig. Jimmy Harbaugh was a born-and-bred Westerner—a *real* cowboy. The attire in which he came to the fair was not intended to panic the gals, or to impress his fellows. All was in perfect good taste. All serviceable, and worn because they were—just that.

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STAR WESTERN

I may almost say all cowboys wore Stetsons—black, gray, brown. Sombreros, with six, seven and eight inch crowns with brims so broad they served both as sunshades and as umbrellas. Sometimes the brims were tipped with braid. Sometimes the cowpoke would cut holes in the outer brim and through these he would string rawhide or sometimes gold wire.

Wranglers, and many top-hands, always wore gloves, or gauntlets. This advertised in subtle fashion that he was a skillful rider and roper and therefore was not expected to do common work. The gauntlets always had a flare of about five or six inches. If gauntlets were not worn, and even if ordinary gloves were not worn, cowboys always wore wristlets: thick leather; laced tightly. Cowhide, mostly. And, of course every cowpoke wore high-heeled boots—always. He couldn't walk in them. But cowpokes never walked—not even when they were going less than a hundred yards. What were ponies for?

Charley Ransom, of Cleveland, wants to know when the Chisholm trail was closed. The last drive over that famous right-of-way was made in 1880. The first drive over this route occurred in 1867, ending at Abilene which then was the Western terminus of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. There had been a few drives the previous year by such famous pioneers as Jim Daugherty, George Duffield, and Loving and Goodnight. Before that, trail-

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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driving fades into a more or less vague tradition.

To the best of my knowledge there was trail-driving from Texas and New Mexico until about 1895, when it ceased altogether. Too many fenced water holes. Too much barbed wire. And state laws prohibiting the crossing of state borders of Southern cattle. . . .

If you folks want me to write extensively of the old days of trail-driving, I'll be glad to do the best I can. I have ridden with five trail-drives, and I have heard stories from a score of other old-timers who made the trip from the Rio Grande to points in Kansas back in the days when a rider's first requisite, to be a trail-herd hand was an ability to handle a long-range rifle, and to keep a sharp lookout of war bonnets. Tip me off and I'll get busy!

IT PROBABLY would surprise you to know how many letters I have answered by mail during the past month from readers who do their cow-punching vicariously; folks interested in the old West. If I don't know the right answers, I'll make it my business to find some one who does know them. . . .

Maybe also you'd like to know about dude ranches. There are scores of them today where the "old West" is kept alive—in a manner of speaking—and where lovers of the West can find much that will thrill them. *"Ask me"* if you are interested.

* * *

Another thing. Is there some subject about which you'd like to "augur" concerning the West, past, present or future? I'll be glad to hear about it. Then we shore will augur!

Until next time—

Adios, amigos!

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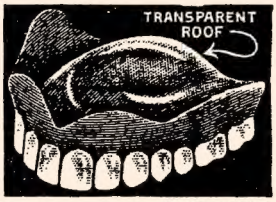

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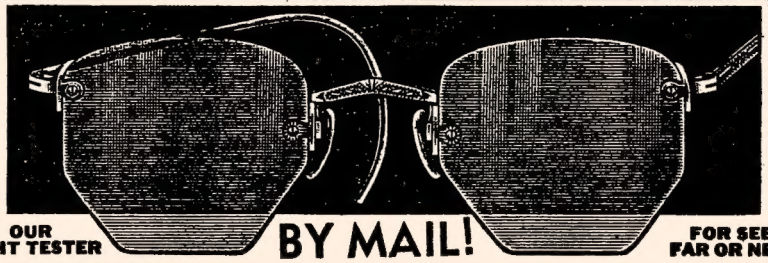

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